‘THE CHURCH IN PUBLIC LIFE’

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WHY DEBATE ‘THE CHURCH IN PUBLIC LIFE’?

The Reverend Canon Carol Wardman

**Salt and Light vs Prophecy**

Few would object to the church being involved in the practical side of community life. Up and down the land, without the involvement of churches, community life would be immeasurably poorer – if not grind to a halt. It is rare to find a church that doesn’t run (or collect for) a foodbank, or run a toddler group or a lunch club, or organise the town carol service, or simply offer a welcoming venue for community groups because the church is the only public building in the village. Many churches go way beyond this – providing night shelters for the homeless, hosting debt counselling services, running job clubs, operating community cafes – and so much more. Add to that the extraordinary number of non-church organisations – from the CAB to Merched Y Wawr, voluntary hospital transport schemes to Safe Families for Children (to name but a tiny few) – which are heavily supported by volunteers who just happen to be members of their local church; and you start to realise what a difference is made by people in all walks of life, who engage with their local community out of a sense that ‘being members of one another’ is not something that just applies on Sundays, but inspires them to go out and make the wider world a better place.

Whilst it is all very well for the church to be involved at the sharp end of community life, providing practical support to people in need, the role of the church in speaking out in ‘the public square’ can be more controversial.

“When I give food to the poor they call me a saint”, Dom Helder Camara famously said. “When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.” Speaking out on the underlying causes of injustice or inequality, questioning the actions of national or local government, or challenging the accepted wisdom of current public policy, can all bring down on the church the criticism of ‘meddling in public affairs’, or even of political bias.

It is these tensions between ‘being salt and light in the world’ in practical action, the ‘prophetic calling’ to speak out on issues of importance to our common life, and the Gospel imperative to spread the Good News to individuals and communities, which has the potential for an exciting debate.

**Doing a New Thing?**

Whether it’s Catholic Social Teaching, or Anglican Social Theology, or the practical engagement of evangelical bodies – from the Salvation Army to the Trussell Trust – which leads to observation of the causes of disadvantage and subsequent comment on them, the church has always followed a calling to speak out on issues of common concern at local, national and international level. Christian organisations – Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund, The Children’s Society, Barnardo’s, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, A Rocha, Operation Noah, and many more – provide practical help, but also engage in policy comment or campaigning. A particular charism of Anglicanism (especially in England and Wales) is its social theology, integral to its witness, which arises from its unique position in national life.
Internally, it can be challenging – especially when the church feels itself to be struggling, worried about falling attendances, or under financial pressure – to defend the prophetic calling to speak out on public affairs or engage in campaigning. It can be risky, and not everyone will agree with us. There may be differences between church members on important issue. Such things may even be seen as a distraction from evangelism (defined as overtly and specifically introducing people to the Gospel of Jesus); but in reality, all these are part of the Gospel, and part of our incarnational mandate to work in the world.

Simply because of what it is and how it works, the Church in Wales has a wide range of opportunities for engagement – and already invests in this area of mission and ministry.

- **At parish level,** Church buildings, projects and leaders are visible in every community, its buildings and personnel becoming a focus of unity, and acting as community spokespeople when significant events occur.

- **At diocesan level,** Bishops are recognisable leadership figures often called upon for public comment. Their opinions are newsworthy when they pro-actively approach the media or public platform.

- **At national level,** the Archbishop of Wales is recognised as a senior leader in the country, in many perceptions on a par with the First Minister. The Archbishop’s opinion is sought by the media and significant national institutions, often acting as a spokesperson for ‘faith’ – aided by excellent relationships between different faiths in Wales.

- **Statutorily,** the Church in Wales retains a unique position in respect of weddings, funerals, burial grounds, schools, and historic buildings. This gives it an automatic stake in public and national life, slightly different from that of other denominations; although we share with other churches (and faiths) involvement in hospitals, prisons, further and higher education, and the armed forces, through specialist chaplaincies.

- **Ecumenically,** there is much co-operation on responses to consultations, Welsh Assembly and parliamentary affairs. Whilst this is carried our jointly and with a careful regard for consensus across denominations, sheer capacity issues mean that the Church in Wales is arguably the most significant contributor, working closely on a day-to-day level with Cytun, especially through the ecumenical ‘Laser Group’ (Assembly and Parliamentary monitoring) and the Cytun Working Group on Europe.

- **Organisationally,** the Bishops’ Adviser for Church and Society works at a national level on policy, advisory and strategic issues on the interface between the church and ‘the rest of the world’. Special Interest Groups (international, environmental, rural, etc) comprise representatives from dioceses, and experts in particular disciplines, and contribute with comment and research – either on request, or pro-actively. Social Responsibility Officers in each diocese (job-titles and descriptions vary), who assist parishes and projects on a practical level, feed their experiences and insights into policy comments.
For The Church and For The World

If we see it as part of the calling of the Church in Wales to engage with public affairs, we can rejoice in having both a clear mandate, and considerable opportunities to do so. Key reasons are summarised here – and whilst they have been divided into sections for ease of organisation, the categories overlap and reinforce one another.

Theologically:

- In the Incarnation, we see God deeply involved in the stuff of human life.
- Jesus sent us, his disciples, into the world to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, etc.
- Our sacraments encourage us to see the ordinary facts of life (washing, eating, family life, caring for the sick and dying, etc) as symbols of God’s involvement with the world.
- We are not just here to please ourselves. Our accountability is not only to one another, but also to God as both the Creator, and ultimate source of all good.
- We regard the whole human family, and indeed the cosmos, as inter-related and precious to God.
- Faith is not abstract or theoretical: living it out informs not only charitable action, but also how we spend our money, cast our votes, relate to our neighbours.
- There is a long history of the Christians and theologians speaking out to influence public policy – think of the abolition of slavery, the anti-apartheid movement, Fairtrade, Jubilee 2000.

Confidently:

- Our social action or comment is informed by the Gospel. It does not conflict with mission and evangelism.
- Recent years and governments have shown a changed attitude to faith-based community action, seeing it as important to community cohesion and building social capital. Projects no longer need to hide their links with the church.
- There is evidence that social and community projects contribute to the building-up of the church: they contribute to the spiritual development of congregations; they generate goodwill in the community; they are noticeably tenacious and long-lasting amongst community projects, especially in deprived areas; they build capacity and are good at turning service-users into volunteers. (More research needs to be done on this, but their long-term value to individual evangelism should not be discounted.)
- The fourth of the Anglican Communion’s Five Marks of Mission is ‘To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation’. Making our voice heard on local, national and global issues is integral to this.
- Asking for ‘a stronger voice on social issues’ was the final point in the young people’s presentation to the April 2017 GB. Ignoring such crucial matters as climate change, world poverty, inequality and discrimination alienates those who have grown up with a new understanding of diversity and equality, in an inter-connected world.
Practically:

- Our presence in every community and at crucial times in people’s lives means that we are aware of the most pressing concerns in the lives of people and communities.

- Involvement in community projects gives us access to the reasons behind presenting needs (e.g. seeing first-hand that the majority of foodbank clients are suffering from benefit cuts or delays).

- We are a substantial organisation in civic society: we cover the whole country; we have well-established structures; other organisations are frequently surprised by and envious of our reach.

- As a global movement and organisation (including as part of the Anglican Communion) we have an international perspective on social, human and environmental issues.

- Our key spokespeople are well-educated, trained to think, and accustomed to tailoring learning and principles to current affairs and circumstances.

- We can co-operate with other like-minded bodies – both ecumenically and inter-faith.

- Our opinion is (usually!) welcomed: we have a different perspective from other pressure groups. Policy-makers are genuinely interested in a perspective that is global, long-term, and informed by a principle of unselfishness and ultimate accountability.

God’s ‘Controversy with People' (Micah 6.2, Hosea 4.1)

The Bible and Christian history are full of debates about how God’s people should relate to the world around them. Holding this debate is part of the ongoing process of working out what it means to be a follower of Christ in the world today.

Canon Carol Wardman,
Bishops’ Adviser for Church and Society
March 2018
ANGLICAN SOCIAL THEOLOGY: RECLAIMING A LOST TRADITION
The Reverend Canon Dr Peter Sedgwick

If you walk around Trelai Park in the west of Cardiff, as I often do, you find dogs chasing each other, young people playing football, and many walkers. Few people know that there is a Roman villa under the grass. Only a few academics and those interested in archaeology know of its existence. The fact that it was unknown to people featured in the Made in Cardiff TV station series ‘Streets of Cardiff’ recently, when it looked at Trelai and Ely.

So too Anglican Social Theology (A.S.T.) was largely lost to the modern church, from the 1960s until quite recently. A.S.T. refers to the writings, speeches and sermons of theologians and church leaders in the Anglican Church from its creation in the sixteenth century until the twentieth century. It is one of the great secrets of the Anglican Church. But in the last ten years a few people, especially Rowan Williams, have recovered this lost treasure. This paper seeks to take this recovery further.

What we have instead of referring to A S T is very good social action. We also have prophetic, thoughtful statements by bishops and church leaders, including laity and clergy. Archbishop John’s 2017 enthronement sermon in Brecon went to the heart of the matter, naming the social action, and expressing the need to ‘rehabilitate’ the Christian message:

Let churches and their charities, resolve to proudly affirm caring, loving and open-handed initiatives which, often in partnership with others, they are already taking; supporting and affirming needy communities and people. They work through things such as family centres, food-banks, night-shelters, homelessness projects, in chaplaincies and schools, in towns and cities through the work of street-pastors, through aid agencies rebuilding broken and struggling communities in destitute places some of us have never even heard of, and in so many other ways. Often the work goes unseen, as does a remarkable amount of ordinary but supportive community engagement at home. But, in such ways what churches say they believe takes flesh, has real meaning, and the kingdom comes. We must be ready and not afraid or ashamed to say so and explain so. “That should become part of what I believe has to be a commitment to an overdue drive to rehabilitate and refresh how we explain the Gospel message, helping others really grasp that it’s not simply about going to church.

Why go back and find the lost treasure of A S T? There are two reasons and both of them matter. First, back in the 1970s a young Welsh theologian called Rowan Williams showed how much theology, especially theology in the 1960s, had lost touch with its past tradition. But for Rowan Williams meeting Augustine in 400 or Richard Hooker in 1600 was not a flight to the past. These theologians did the heavy work of relating our faith in Christ to the life of the church in the world. They could speak to our contemporary world with freshness and immediacy. Take Richard Hooker. If the Christian community is ‘supernatural’, in Hooker’s words, that does not mean an especially intense human togetherness, nor a civil religion for all. Rather being ‘supernatural’ means that Christians see the world as having a social life which is rooted in a worship more than we can understand, even if many people do not join in that worship. The nature of Christ, and Christ’s action in offering himself to his Father, is at the
heart of all good worship. This, then, is put by Hooker into dialogue with our own experience. And this gives us a church whose life is rooted in prayer, and which grasps what ordinary social life actually, really, is, underlying our day to day experiences. Put bluntly, being together ('supernatural') is because we are all united in Christ: we are all children of the one true God. Or to quote Hooker, ‘God hath created nothing simply for itself, but each thing in all things… has such an interest that in the whole world nothing is found whereunto anything created can say ‘I need thee not’. ¹

The second reason why it is worth going back to this past tradition of A S T is that those who wrote what is called Anglican Social Theology faced social divisions even greater than our own. In a world where it would have been easy to concentrate on filling churches, and being the comfortable and established church, again and again these theologians reminded the rich and powerful of those who were marginal, poor and neglected. It was as much of a challenge for Hugh Latimer preaching the Sermon of the Plough in 1548, or F D Maurice in 1850, or William Temple in 1944, as it is now.

The great names of A S T are Richard Hooker, Master of the Temple, and parish priest near Canterbury who died aged 46 in 1600 of a cold; Jeremy Taylor, imprisoned in Wales during the Civil War, who died aged 54 having caught a fever from a sick person he had visited as a Bishop; F D Maurice, who threw his weight behind the co-operative movement in the 1850s, after the mass popular protests by the Chartists in 1848, and who lost his professorship at King’s College, London for denying eternal punishment in hell for those not saved; Charles Gore, Bishop of three dioceses, founder in 1892 of the Community of the Resurrection, powerful advocate of state intervention, and fierce critic of British Imperialism during the Boer War, who died in 1932; William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, very close friend and colleague of William Beveridge who drew up the blue-print for the Welfare State, who died aged 63 of overwork in 1944. The last name is Rowan Williams himself, who in retirement has become Chair of Christian Aid, and whose life has been marked by a prophetic witness to social action, inspired by the past Anglican tradition. In the last five years, several books have led this return to A S T, and are listed at the end. This short paper does the same.

What are the key messages of this tradition? First, it spoke the truth to power. Bishop Hugh Latimer preached in 1548 “For is there not reigning in London as much pride, as much covetousness, as much cruelty, as much oppression, and as much superstition, as was in Nebo? Yes, I think, and much more too.” ² William Temple in his great work Christianity and Social Order, reprinted countless times during the Second World War, (I treasure my 1943 copy with the advertisement for Mars Bars 'cut them into slices and let all the family enjoy them') quoted what critics of unemployment had on their banners in street marches ‘Damn your charity; we want justice’. As Temple said, the key question is why should some have to need that charity, and others be in the position to give it?

Secondly, it sees human society as one in Christ. In Maurice’s famous words, often requoted, ‘The Church… is human society in its normal state; the World, that same society irregular and abnormal. The world is the Church without God; the Church is the world restored to its relation with God, taken back by Him into the state for which He created it.’³ ‘For He is

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¹ Hooker, Sermon on Pride, italics original.
² Bishop Hugh Latimer, Sermon of the Plough, St. Paul's Cathedral, London, January 18, 1548.
³ F. D. Maurice, Theological Essays.
theirs as well as ours. ...The baptized Church is not set apart as a witness for exclusion, but against it’. 4The unity of humanity rests in the Fatherhood of God.

Third, it sees the task of the church is to witness to this truth. No one put it better than Temple. The task of the church ‘is to win this world for the Kingdom of God’.5 It is because of its belief in the Incarnation that the Church feels that being involved in politics is part of its mission. How that is done is a matter of key debate, but ‘it is in the sacramental view of the universe... that there is given hope of making human both politics and economics and of making effectual both faith and love.’6

Anglican Social Theology is a tradition which is quite realistic about the fact that the world is in need of change. In religious terms, the world is fallen, even if all are in Christ, and the redemption of the world is what the church points to. This is not, however, the language we should use in a television interview, for it sounds churchy. Secondly, AST is a deeply religious tradition, for ‘our faith depends on the action of a God who is to be trusted; God keeps promises.’ Furthermore, this God shows us that there is a common destiny for us all. ‘The welfare and giftedness of each and the welfare of all are inseparable.’7 Thirdly, our task as a church is to rediscover the tradition of AST. In the urgency of the political debate of 2018 we need to show how this tradition holds governments to account and provides a theological basis for working with people, whether atheists, non-Christians, or whoever. The task is to achieve justice for all. In the famous words of Temple, government ‘is the art of so ordering life that self-interest prompts what justice demands.’8 Rediscovering the lost tradition of AST will allow his words, and many others like him, to speak again in our time.

Canon Dr Peter Sedgwick

Further reading:
2. William Temple Christianity and Social Order, 1976
4. Rowan Williams Faith in the Public Square Bloomsbury, 2012

4 F D Maurice, The Prayer-Book Considered. Italics original.  
5 Archbishop William Temple, Christus Veritas  
7 Archbishop Rowan Williams, Faith in the Public Square.  
8 Archbishop William Temple, Christianity and Social Order.
 HOW DO WE DECIDE AS A CHURCH ABOUT POLITICS?

The Reverend Canon Dr Peter Sedgwick

Looking to the Bible?

1. The issue of how the church, or church members, should get involved in politics is not a new one. It has nothing to do whether the Welsh Assembly Government is run by Christian politicians or not. Ever since the New Testament was written, Christians have debated about how politics and religion mix. The Church has a mandate to preach and live out the Gospel. Equally, the state uses political power to rule people, and fulfill its democratic mandate. In John 18.36 (‘Jesus answered ‘my kingdom is not of this world’’), and Romans 13.1 (‘for there is no authority which is not from God’), the difference and also the relationship between the Gospel and political power is shown. Political and legal power has a necessary autonomy from the church, and this is part of God’s design for humanity. Christians do not believe in, or wish for, a political order run by clergy, or the church, whatever may have happened at certain times in history. The greatest theologian to wrestle with this tension between religion and politics was St. Augustine, as the Roman Empire tottered to its end in 430 A. D. He argued that the Roman Empire was not a sign of God’s providence, nor was Roman imperial rule an unmitigated good. However, it did provide a limited peace in which the Gospel could be preached and lived out.

2. It is never the case that Christians simply abandon politics as nothing to do with religion. Christians in political life have a very important vocation, and all Christians have a duty to be involved in the life of their community for its good. This may be just helping a house-bound person next door, or helping at a club for the disabled, but it can also mean at times being involved in political choices, joining voluntary organizations such as food banks, and expressing political views. Christians are not called to say and do nothing until the end of the world comes.

Ways of Thinking about it all.

3. So how do we do this? In as simple an outline as possible, there are three ways.
   - First, we can use the ordinary language of our society, because it points us to certain beliefs and actions. This is called appealing to ‘the common good’.
   - Secondly, we can argue from our faith to certain principles of belief and action.
   - Thirdly, we can use the Bible to draw out possibilities of belief and action.

What do we mean by the ‘Common Good’?

4. The basic values of our society are sometimes called ‘the common good’. In 2015 the Church of England bishops published a pamphlet before the General Election appealing to the language of the common good. Its title was Who Is my Neighbour? It said that ‘the Church of England strives to be a church which seeks the good of all the people of the country.’ The Church in Wales has argued the same way. There are three things which are important here.
• First, seeking the common good means that we act and speak in a way that unites and does not divide people further. So far as possible we seek to avoid conflict, polarization and division. In Wales in 2018 this is a crucial point. There are great divisions, which need not to widen further.

• Secondly, the common good values people and groups because they exist, and not for their functions. It is wrong to look at people and ask simply how they can provide more economic value. Once you run the financial slide-rule over people, and ask how human relationships can be costed out, you are in danger of losing the reality of the common good.

• Thirdly, technology such as social media (Twitter, Facebook, emails and texts) certainly drives us closer together, but this does not necessarily increase community or social solidarity. It is easy to be heavily involved in social media, and still feel extremely isolated, without contributing anything to human well-being. Long ago, Richard Hooker argued in 1594 that the purpose of a society was to ‘live well’. So, what is the common good for people in your part of Wales in 2018? It is an important question. How do people in your local community ‘live well’?

Arguing from what Christians believe about being a person to political action.

5. William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, gave the most coherent account of arguing from the Christian faith to principles of belief and action.

• Since God is the loving Father of all, and became human in Jesus Christ, the first principle we should adopt when thinking about society and politics is the freedom and dignity of each person. The political expression of this principle is that each person has worth independent of their usefulness to society or the economy. The State exists for each person, or citizen. It is not the other way around.

• The second principle is that God created persons for love, fellowship and relationships. This is why families, schools and many other bodies are important. The political expression of this is that the State should foster community at the local level. We are not just competitive, isolated individuals.

• The third principle that Temple drew from the Christian faith is that the dignity and worth of a person is expressed in service to others. We see this in Jesus Christ, and we see it in living for others. This takes us back to the idea of the common good, discussed above.

• Temple also applied these principles to specific proposals, but these were only tentative suggestions. What many after Temple, such as Ronald Preston, suggested was a particular approach. Christians agree on certain principles, such as freedom, fellowship and service. They next listen to those who know about a particular situation, such as doctors or teachers. They then seek to apply the principles which they agree on to the situation they encounter. Temple’s suggestions in 1942, when he wrote his great book Christianity and Social Order, were given as an appendix at the back. Such proposals included the need for everyone who was in paid work to have a paid holiday, and two days rest in seven. Another was that all children should have an education until they were an adult.
'planned to allow for his peculiar aptitudes and make possible their full development'. Such ideas were controversial in 1942, and are still the subject of fierce debate. But they are Temple's attempt to relate the principles of freedom and dignity, fellowship and service to the politics of his day. If you began with what your Christian faith said about being a person, what principles would you choose? Would they be the same as Temple's? And how would you relate these principles to daily political debate and action?

Using the Bible in thinking about politics.

6. There is another approach to thinking about politics. It sits alongside the language of the common good, and of taking principles about being a person and applying them to politics. This is the method of reading the Bible, either as an individual or as a small group, and seeing what leaps out at them. This is the method so powerfully set out by Laurie Green, who was once a parish priest in the parish covered by Spaghetti Junction in the West Midlands, and then became Bishop of Bradwell. It follows a pattern first used by small groups in Latin America in the 1960s, sometimes called 'liberation theology'. Green's many books, such as *Let's Do Theology*, *Power to the Powerless*, and *Blessed are the Poor?* have sold in their thousands since the 1970s. Green moves from encouraging people to look at their experiences; then exploring those experiences; then finding links with Biblical passages; and finally moving into a response, all the time using Scripture as the group encounters it. This is a way of looking at Scripture which draws heavily on the experience of group study. Green writes that the Church has to serve the people, and not that people should serve the Church, drawing on Jesus in Mark 2.27 saying that the Sabbath was there to serve people (*Blessed are the Poor?* p. 162).

Canon Dr Peter Sedgwick
New Year's Day 2018
WHY IT’S WORTH TAKING PART:  
THE CHURCH IN WALES AND FAITH-BASED POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY  

Dr Matthew D. Rees

Paper Outline

This paper’s primary purpose is to discuss why political engagement is a worthwhile pursuit for the Church in Wales. The arguments made in this paper derive from PhD research conducted at Aberystwyth University’s International Politics department, generously funded by the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. This research consisted of four years of research on how faith-based organisations at the sub-state level in the UK engage politically. In this research, the Church in Wales was one of eight case studies. The paper provides a number of points with the intention of creating discussion and leading to fruitful conversation on the Church in Wales’ political engagement. The paper concentrates in the main on the political environment and political system in which the Church in Wales might engage as a political actor.

Like any good sermon, the paper has three main points. The first considers whether Wales’ political institutions are ‘secular spaces’ and argues that this is not the case. The second looks at the importance of being present to engage with opportunities which exist. Finally, the paper considers what is meant by the term ‘influence’. In considering this the paper argues that the church needs to be realistic, creative and long term in its thinking about the political influence it may wish to achieve.

The myth of the secular Assembly

The observation which first led me to be interested in questions of politics and religion was the apparent dichotomy which appears to exist in the popular psyche around the power religious actors enjoy. On the one hand many people will tell you that the West has become ‘secular’, it has ‘secularised’ and religion has been pushed to the margins of its societies. This is a common academic position (see Toft et al 2013: 74 for a discussion on this) as well as a position you might hear presented to you in the back of a taxi or at a pub. However, another common adage which one hears is the idea that the Catholic Church, or the Vatican, is some sinister international power which pulls strings and makes deals and has huge influence. While these are both common arguments to hear – both cannot be true. Either religion has been marginalised, or it still has a role to play. But which one is it?

Many people of faith buy into the idea that secularisation has marginalised the role of faith into the private sphere. Many Christians believe that faith no longer has a place in the public or political spheres. I have often heard this line of argument expressed in relation to the National Assembly for Wales’ decisions not to hold prayers at the beginning of a day’s business in the way in which the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament do (see Bonney 2013: 75-77 for a discussion on this matter). Is a spirit of secularism therefore pervasive at the National Assembly for Wales? Research conducted by Chambers and Thompson (2005) and Rees (2016) argue that the institution is open to faith engagement and that FBOs have the opportunity to engage.
This paper does not provide the space to flesh this out in detail, but I will expound one example. The consequences of September 2001 led the First Minister of Wales to establish an ‘inter-faith council’ as a sub-committee of the National Assembly for Wales. In 2003 this sub-committee became detached from the Assembly, and became the Faith Communities Forum with the specific aim, ‘to facilitate dialogue’ between the Assembly, the then Welsh Assembly Government and the major faith communities ‘on matters affecting economic, social and cultural life in Wales’ (see Chambers and Thompson 2006, Chaney 2011, Bonney 2013, Rees 2016).

The forum is made up of seven faiths, with the Church in Wales represented. The forum has consistently been chaired by the First Minister since 2001 providing an opportunity for FBOs to have their voices heard. Not only does this offer face-to-face engagement with the First Minister, it also provides an opportunity for informal discussion behind closed doors, ensuring that decision makers are fully aware of the FBOs’ position on a range of issues (Rees 2016:149-150). This space offers an extremely important space for the Church in Wales to engage politically. Research demonstrates that the forum has offered a timely and intimate opportunity for faith-based organisations to raise and discuss both controversial and vital issue for faith-based organisations since 1999. Two key areas of discussion include the Welsh Government’s approach to faith schools and presumed consent legislation (see Rees 2016).

In the 21st century’s competitive political environment, which provides little opportunity for real debate and nuance, the Faith Communities Forum does provide faith-based organisations with an opportunity to discuss controversial and difficult issues in a sensitive manner. Of course, the Forum does not ensure FBOs get their way, but it does ensure a seat at the table and that their voices are heard (see Rees 2016). There is no similar forum to be found in Scotland or Westminster, and Northern Ireland’s ‘Community Faiths’ Forum’ is much more limited in its scope, only providing discussion between FBOs and the department for Social Development (see Rees 2016:218).

Instead, the Faith Communities Forum is a key space which provides FBOs with access to the First Minister and his/her staff, and an opportunity to articulate the nuanced position which faith-based organisations hold on a range of issues. Further to this, the Faith Communities Forum also provides an opportunity for FBOs to work together (see Rees 2016). In a competitive political world, the opportunity to demonstrate a united front (or at least agreement on part of an issue) greatly bolsters an organisation’s position when vying for decision makers’ attention and sympathy (Whitford 2003:45, Mahoney 2007: 370, Rees 2016: 285). The Faith Communities Forum brings faith groups together in a way which encourages discussion and possibly even the development of strategy (Rees 2016:297-298).

This is just one example of how the Assembly and the Welsh Government are places which are open to faith engagement. In essence, the example of the Faith Communities Forum highlights how faith-faith based organisations still have an opportunity to engage, even in a more pluralistic and democratic Wales of the 21st century. Faith-based organisations may no longer enjoy the same level of privilege as they did in the 19th century, but they do have the opportunity to engage in the 21st century. It is of course up to FBOs how they choose to utilise this opportunity.
Opportunities

Andy Flanagan, the former director of Christians on the Left, wrote a book in 2015 entitled ‘Those who show up’. The book argues that it is those who ‘show up’ to committees and party meetings and who are elected to seemingly inconsequential positions who can really influence politics in the 21st century. The Church in Wales would be wise to take heed of Flanagan’s words. We live in a world where decision makers are expected to widely consult on policy and legislation before it becomes law (Cairney 2008: 361, Chaney 2011: 268). However, decision makers also find it difficult to ensure that they have consulted widely on a whole raft of issues a government may be legislating on at any one point in time. It is therefore key that the Church in Wales and other faith-based organisations utilise the capacity which they have to engage and to have their voices heard. Once again, engaging with a consultation process does not automatically lead to influence, but it does ensure that an organisation’s views have been heard. It is from a consultation submission that an organisation can begin to build a campaign in support or defence of that being proposed by decision makers.

For instance, many will remember the vast public engagement of Archbishop Barry Morgan on the issue of presumed consent for organ donation in Wales – or the Human Transplantation Act 2013 (see Rees 2016). Less will remember the way in which Church in Wales staff complemented the public work of the Archbishop by engaging with the Welsh Government and the Assembly’s Health and Social Care committee’s consultation processes (see Rees 2016 for a more detailed discussion). In this instance, it was important the Archbishop articulated his position to the public via the media, but it was equally important that the Church ‘showed up’ and put meat on the bone in terms of the detailed changes it wanted to see to the wording of the legislation (see Rees 2016 for a more detailed discussion).

It is also important to take long term engagement into account here. Faith-based organisations would be wise to heed the Catholic Church’s example, which is famous for thinking in 500 year cycles rather than the five year cycle of most organisations. By engaging with consultation processes over time, and being seen to engage as a ‘good citizen’ with useful and well thought through submissions, an organisation can build an important reputation as an organisation which gives as well as takes.

Influence in its many forms

Faith and political influence have an interesting relationship in Wales. Faith-based organisations have seen real influence historically, from their role in the social and political changes of the 19th century (see Morgan 1999) or its influence over education which spanned well into the 20th century (see Jones 1990, Hughes 1999) – faith leaders have often been at the forefront of political and social change. This has left a high level of expectation within faith-based organisations in Wales, and from those looking in from the outside, as to what the church should be capable of and should be capable of achieving when it comes to political influence. When faith-based organisations do not see the level of influence in the 21st century that they saw historically, they tend to spend a lot of time depressed about the situation at best, and at worst self-flagellate themselves for not achieving desired outcomes.

In many ways, faith-based organisations do not need to work harder. They need to think smarter. Just because faith-based organisations cannot expect to pick up the phone and have a piece of legislation they dislike halted or eliminated, does not mean that faith-based
organisation cannot achieve influence in the 21st century. Instead, faith-based organisations need to think differently.

Firstly, they need to recognise that influence is possible. That is, tangible change is possible. Jubilee 2000, an initiative that came out of the UK and US churches, is an excellent example of faith-based organisations achieving tangible influence as they successfully campaigned to see the UK and US government reduce or ‘forgive’ a portion of third world debt at the turn of the millennium. However, it is also important to remember that campaigns and initiatives such as Jubilee 2000 may only come about once a century. They are not the norm, and they are not where faith-based organisations should set the bar.

Therefore, the Church needs to recognise that there are other ways of understanding and achieving influence. Influence does not have to include seeing an unfavourable piece of legislation stopped or a favourable initiative succeed. Influence can be a number of different things. The church needs to be realistic about what it can achieve, and it needs to outline what it actually expects and desires to achieve every time it begins to engage with a specific policy area or initiative. Why is the Church engaging in the first place, what is the minimum the Church would like to achieve from its engagement, and what is the ideal situation are questions that should be posed instinctively.

In creating a spectrum of ‘achievable’, it makes it easier to manage expectations as well as reach desired outcomes. There is no point going into a battle to change something which an organisation knows it cannot change. I.e the reality is that some issues are hopeless issues. Instead, an organisation needs to re-calibrate its focus on what it thinks it can change. Once this has been decided, it should pursue this change at the expense of other options. This might mean not engaging on an issue at all as it may not wish to waste resources, at other times it may choose to target one area of a ‘hopeless issue’ in order to bring about a small level of change which it believes is achievable. The Church needs to think about the issues in which it wants to see change over the next ten years, it needs to work out what is realistic and achievable in these areas, and what is worth pursuing. In the long run, simply being reactive will vastly reduce an organisation’s ability to achieve change.

Influence can include a number of different things. For instance, an organisation can fail to influence a piece of legislation while succeeding in influencing the wider public debate. That is, an organisation may fail in the short term but succeed in the long term. The church might also choose to try and change the wording of unwanted legislation in order to somewhat alleviate the effect of its undesirable nature. A faith-based organisation also needs to understand the role solidarity plays in its political engagement. At times, a faith-based organisation will speak out on behalf of those who have no voice (the poor, the persecuted etc) and will not see change come about, at least in the short term, due to the huge structural issues which exist in the world. This is not being defeatist, it is simple being realistic. In these situations, the church might not see change, but needs to understand that it must stand, and continue to speak out, on behalf of these groups or issues even when nothings seems to change. Understanding that change is not always the long and short of engagement is key (see Rees 2018).
Conclusion

This paper presents a set of discussion points which the Church in Wales can use to analyse its current political engagement and think about its future engagement. The paper argues that the National Assembly for Wales and Welsh Government are open to faith engagement, and that there are opportunities to engage. Therefore, the church needs to ‘show up’ and consider consultation processes as its primary engagement on which a wider strategy of engagement can be developed. Finally, the paper has argued that influence can be understood in a range of ways, and that the church needs to be both realistic and creative in what it aims to achieve, and needs to think long term in how it goes about achieving influence in the 21st century.

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Bibliography


I'm approaching the question of what role the Church should play in public life very much from an outsider's perspective, but I hope that does not prevent this paper being of some use in helping to further the debate on this topic. I will begin this essay by briefly exploring possible justifications for why the Church should not involve itself within the public sphere, before presenting an argument for not only why the Church should participate in public life, but the nature and scope of this involvement.

It could be argued that the focus of any religious life should be on the contemplation of the eternal and the divine. Reflecting on public and political matters can not only serve as a distraction from this task but can also taint these reflections, due to the enquiries being different in nature. The nature of public and political dilemmas often calls for compromise, not only with others but also between our own values. For example, when we are asked to reflect on ethical issues, it is rare that we are called upon to make a judgement between what is clearly right and wrong. Usually, any serious reflection on these matters will be nuanced, recognising the weight of values on both sides of the debate. For example, the debate surrounding the morality of euthanasia needs to weigh up the compassion we feel for those who are suffering and no longer wish to continue with their lives with the value we place upon human life that prohibits the taking of life. Reflecting on these matters requires us to acknowledge that the values that we hold, when they run up against real-world situations, do not always sit comfortably together. Reflecting on these public dilemmas requires that we find a compromise in our values in a way in which reflecting upon the divine may not. This is not to say that reflecting upon the divine and the social sphere cannot be compatible, or that reflecting upon the divine cannot be relevant in informing social debates. However, the sort of thinking required for reflection on public matters, where compromise of values is needed, could be thought to taint the purity of thought that is necessary when contemplating matters which do not require such compromise. It is perhaps for this reason that many who have sought a religious life have chosen to isolate themselves from the everyday public sphere. Practical engagement in the public realm may also lead to a compromise in values, as we are required to work with others who may not share our values. To do good work often requires us to do deals, sacrificing things we value in order to bring about a greater good.

If the focus of the religious life is upon the contemplation of the eternal and the divine, then it could be seen that the Church's role is to provide guidance in such matters and to create a sacred space separate from the social and political sphere to promote and protect this contemplation. If the Church were to involve itself in the public sphere, then the walls created to protect this sacred space would be broken down and the focus on the religious life, the contemplation of the eternal and the divine, would be compromised.

It is difficult, however, to engage in any serious contemplation of the eternal and the divine without reflecting upon what is good and virtuous. However, serious reflection upon moral matters cannot leave us isolated from the public sphere. We cannot reflect on moral issues with any integrity without this reflection leading us to recognise our moral obligations. However, it is often the case that fulfilling moral obligations does not lead to any compromise in values. For example, the everyday activities of the Church, such as helping the homeless or supporting the running of food banks, does not obviously result in any serious conflict of
values. However, the scope of moral obligations is broader than these concerns. When social practices or political decisions result in suffering, our moral obligations can demand that we engage in these matters. This obligation may then require the Church, or members of the Church, to participate in political or social comment, or take social or political action beyond that of merely helping those in need.

Engaging in the political and social sphere can present dangers for any church. In some extreme cases, where churches are operating in countries run by totalitarian regimes, it could pose an existential threat. This threat creates a challenging moral dilemma, either stand up for what is right and face persecution or do what good you can within limits defined by the regime. There are no easy answers to this dilemma.

This dilemma, fortunately, is not the problem faced by the Church in Wales, although that is not to say that the Church would not face political pressures if it did engage more within the political sphere. However, what is perhaps more important is the impact that such engagement would have upon the congregation of the Church. The congregation of the Church is made up of people with different political opinions. If the Church were to engage with matters in the social and political sphere, for example criticising government policy, then it could be seen as the Church taking a partisan position, alienating those who support the government position. Those who feel alienated by any political stance taken by the Church could feel that they are no longer welcome or may feel antagonistic towards the Church.

Another reason to urge caution on the Church's involvement in the public sphere is that religious organisations have often found themselves on the wrong side of history in their engagement in public life. Religious organisations have historically played a key role in informing public opinion on social matters, and there is a shameful history of religious organisations persecuting certain groups within society due to, amongst other things, their gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or even scientific views.

These problems can occur, in part, due to the nature of the engagement with the public or political sphere. If the Church, or members of the Church, present an explicit criticism of a political position or social practice then this can cause conflicts with those who support that political view or engage in that social practice. However, as we have seen above, social issues are often complex and nuanced and what is often required in these situations is not a pronouncement, but guidance and wisdom. If we again return to the example of euthanasia, if somebody is confronted by the moral challenges of euthanasia then a clear pronouncement as to what should be done is not always what is required and may not help the individual with their own moral reflections. What may be more welcome is the voice of wisdom to illuminate those things which really matter. For example, in complex moral cases, such as euthanasia, there may not be any real sense in which there is a right answer to the dilemma. A person may ultimately make a different decision to the one we would take, but we can still respect their moral integrity and feel that they made the decision based on the right considerations. It is this role in public life that the Church could take, being the voice of wisdom and highlighting those things that matter.

We only need to look at examples of contemporary social issues to see how important considerations can become obscured. For example, discussions about immigration or welfare benefits are often couched in the language of hostility, resulting in the humanity of those involved becoming obscured. In such debates, the role of the Church could be to remind people of simple truths, for example, the humanity of those involved and the importance of love and compassion. In doing so, it is not providing a pronouncement of what is the correct
course of action but is reminding us some of the fundamental considerations that should inform the debate.

This approach to engaging in the public sphere does not make the Church immune from the criticism that it is meddling in politics. Such an approach may still sometimes require the Church to comment when the result of political policies or social practices results, for example, in cruelty or hardship. However, any mature society should welcome such voices. Even if we are often initially defensive when we are reminded that we have lost sight of some things that are valuable, it is still important that our failings are highlighted.

Sometimes in public life difficult decisions need to be made, and as a result people are harmed. In such situations, however, it is still important that these challenges to our judgments are made, to ensure that decisions are made for the right reasons, and in the light of all the relevant moral considerations. Therefore, these challenges can be beneficial in two ways. If society, or individuals within that society, are in error, having lost sight of important considerations, such guidance is important in shining light on the situation. However, if after such challenges it is still believed that the social or political policy is the right one, then at least the challenges have brought about further reflection, ensuring that the policy is being pursued for the right reasons.

Returning to the grounds for why people may think that the Church should remain removed from the social sphere, namely to create the space for religious contemplation. The approach of guiding wisdom, rather than pronouncement and judgement, is not separate from religious contemplation. Highlighting those features of life which are important is not separate from an investigation of the truth. Such views are also not compromised by the requirement in the public or political sphere to find a resolution to conflicts. Returning to the euthanasia debate, the voice of wisdom can highlight the important considerations, for example, the importance of compassion and the value of human life, without making a judgement as to which action or policy is appropriate, which by the nature of the dilemma and the competing values involved would require compromise.

However, occasionally the Church may find itself commenting on social or political matters in which there is no conflict of moral values, situations in which certain things are unquestionably morally right or wrong. In such cases, it is perhaps right for the Church to not merely highlight important moral considerations, but to denounce what is wrong, or champion what is right. However, given the history of religious institutions being on the wrong side of social debates, it is important to be humble and to tread carefully in these matters and to be open to other voices within society that can be a challenge to the Church's views.

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