A NEW LOOK FOR WELSH GOVERNMENT

On Friday November 3, First Minister Carwyn Jones reshaped his Government. Three ministers left the government - Jane Hutt, after 18 years of continuous service; Carl Sargeant, following allegations against him; and Mick Antoniw, the Counsel General.

Gethin Rhys, Cytûn’s Policy Officer, said, “We will be writing to all the new ministers welcoming their appointments, and we look forward to working with them as with their predecessors.” He added, “It is interesting to note that the First Minister has increased the total number of ministers by two, which inevitably means reducing by two the number of Assembly Members who are available to become members of committees, ask questions and scrutinise the government. This will increase further the workload of those who remain on the backbenches and in the opposition parties.”

WORK ON BREXIT CONTINUES

Cytûn’s Wales and Europe Working Party continues with its work of monitoring developments in the negotiations regarding the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union, and the resulting Westminster legislation, especially as they affect Wales. We do this on the basis of a number of Christian principles, notably:

- Keeping promises. If commitments were made during the Referendum campaign or in its immediate aftermath (for example, to replace EU subsidies or to release revenue for public services), every effort should be made to carry them out.
- Truth telling. It is important for government’s credibility that the electorate is not misled by false or inaccurate information.
- Concern for the powerless. Our concern extends to those who are marginalised in society – such as the poor, disabled, and so on, and all those affected by decisions made elsewhere, such as businesses, workers and EU citizens in Wales.
- Ensuring all voices are heard. Democracy should ensure this: so it is important not to undermine it by abrogating principles or withdrawing powers which have previously been democratically agreed (such as the devolution settlement).

All the Working Party’s latest submissions can be found on the website http://www.cytun.cymru/waleseurope/index.html and we intend to hold a number of meetings in local areas during 2018 to ensure that we are hearing all voices. We will welcome invitations from local interdenominational groups of churches. More details can be obtained from Gethin Rhys at gethin@cytun.cymru.
CONTINUED CONCERN REGARDING COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Church community projects are still concerned about the ending of the Welsh Government’s Communities First programme. From April 2018, a considerably smaller amount of funding will be available through local authorities to continue some individual projects, but local projects say that they have not yet received the assurances they need regarding the future.

The specific concerns of the Faith in Families programme of the Diocese of Swansea & Brecon of the Church in Wales were raised in the Senedd on September 20, but a number of other projects are known to be in a similar situation.

In the mean time, the Welsh Government has launched a new capital funding programme worth £100 million of targeted regeneration investment. This replaces the Vibrant and Viable Places programme, which distributed some £125 million during 2014-17.

Local authorities, along with partner organisations, will be able to apply for the capital investment for projects that promote economic regeneration and serve the aims of wider sustainable development with activities focussed at individuals and areas most in need.

It will help create jobs, enhance skills and employability, and create the environment for businesses to grow and thrive. The new regeneration programme will be able to invest in projects from April 2018 onwards.

A National Regeneration Investment Panel will also be established which will be charged with ensuring that the investment available is utilised as effectively as possible across Wales, including rural areas.

HISTORIC CHURCH BUILDINGS IN WALES – WHAT NEXT?

Cytûn leads the engagement with Cadw (the conservation arm of Welsh Government) by the denominations in Wales who own nearly all of Wales’s 3,000 historic places of worship. A Historic Places of Worship in Wales Forum meets regularly, the next meeting being on November 29th in the beautifully restored Christ Church, used by the United Church in Rhyl. This historic building has been adapted for contemporary use by the community and shows how it is possible to blend the traditional and the new.

The Culture, Welsh Language & Communication Committee, made up of backbench members of the Assembly, is currently holding an inquiry into the historic environment in Wales. Cytûn submitted written evidence on behalf of our member churches explaining some of the difficulties which face churches in preserving the built heritage entrusted to us whilst also enabling the use of our buildings for contemporary worship and meeting the needs of the community. The Committee has invited Cytûn and some of our member churches to give oral evidence on November 22.

Meanwhile, Cadw has begun the work to update the 1994 ‘Ecclesiastical Exemption’ Order by which some Christian Churches operate their own systems of Listed Building Consent – many of them more rigorous than the secular system which applies to other buildings – when they wish to alter or adapt their listed buildings. Cytûn and the member churches concerned are actively involved in consultation regarding the details of any changes which may be proposed.
HOW MUCH IS TOO LITTLE?

The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee of the Assembly is undertaking a consultation on the Public Health (Minimum Price for Alcohol) (Wales) Bill, introduced by the Welsh Government. The closing date for responses is 15 December 2017, and it is likely that during this period the Supreme Court will deliver its verdict on a case brought by the Scotch Whisky Association and others against similar proposed legislation in Scotland. When the Wales Act 2017 comes into force in April 2018, the Assembly will lose the power to pass such an Act, so the Welsh Government is keen to proceed before then.

Some Cytûn members, notably the Salvation Army, have long campaigned for such a law, drawing on their experience of the consequences of over-indulgence in alcohol. It is also supported by a number of secular organisations, such as Welsh cancer charity Tenovus.

ASSEMBLY DISCUSSES RISE IN HATE CRIMES

As new figures showed an increase in hate crimes in Wales, members of the Assembly discussed the matter in plenary on October 17, and members of the Faith Communities Forum discussed the issue with the First Minister the previous day.

In the Senedd, then Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children, Carl Sargeant AM, referred to the increase in hate crimes relating to religion and to the rise of a new kind of hate crime based on language – including hate directed at those speaking Welsh in public.

The official figures (which can be found here) show that hate crimes grew by almost a quarter in Wales during 2016/17. 2,941 such crimes were reported during the year, compared with 2,405 the previous year – an increase of 22.3%. Increases were reported regarding each of the five recorded characteristics – race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender. There was an increase in each of the four police force areas. The greatest increase was seen around the time of the EU referendum in June 2016.

Carl Sargeant said, “Much of this increase is likely to be due to an increase in the rates of reporting…. Nevertheless, there is real concern amongst the Police, the third sector and other partners at the rising number of hate crimes committed last year. We have therefore been working closely with them to …. build communities where hate crime is not tolerated and victims are supported to the utmost. Nobody should think that they have any license to abuse people.”

Also in the Senedd, Bethan Jenkins AM referred to hate crimes against Muslims in particular, and Dawn Bowden AM said she had been trolled on social media as a result of attending in the Senedd a Nation of Sanctuary event about welcoming refugees to Wales.

Hannah Blythyn AM talked about addressing a meeting in St Asaph Cathedral marking the 50th anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain, held the same week.

The Assembly debate can be read in full here or watched here.
WELSH BUDGET DAY

Although November 22 is ‘Budget Day’ at Westminster, and that budget will have considerable effects in Wales, Wales Budget Day has already happened, on October 3. This was the day when the Welsh Government announced its spending plans for 2018-19 – and, for the first time, its taxation plans also.

Spending in total is still largely determined by a block grant allocated by the UK Government on the basis of a formula known as the Barnett Formula. The total may change slightly following the Westminster budget in November, but on the basis of current expectations, the Welsh Government – in agreement with Plaid Cymru – has allocated spending between departments as shown on the right.

The smallest department – Environment and rural affairs – is receiving the largest cuts – a 15.27% reduction. The Welsh Government has pointed out that much of this reduction is a result of transferring a grant relating to recycling to the Local Government spending line – meaning that it no longer needs to be spent on recycling. Even so, considerable concern has been expressed by farming unions and environmental groups regarding possible results of the reduction in spending in this field. Concern has also been expressed regarding the Supporting People grant, which helps vulnerable people avoid homelessness, which will no longer be ring-fenced from 2019-20.

This was the first Welsh budget to set taxation rates. For 2018-19 only two taxes are devolved. Land Transaction Tax will replace Stamp Duty Land Tax in Wales, and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Mark Drakeford, announced a number of changes to the rates which will reduce tax on lower-priced housing and increase the tax on higher-priced housing. The changes to rates for commercial property development have a similar effect, and some concern has been expressed about the possible effects on large-scale commercial developments.

Landfill Disposals Tax will, like its predecessor, rise each year with a view to encouraging recycling. The Welsh Government is introducing a new ‘unauthorised disposals rate’ meaning that those convicted of illegal waste disposal will also have to pay higher tax as a result.

The 2019-20 budget will include a Welsh rate of income tax for the first time. The Welsh Government is also consulting on four possible new taxes, with a view to introducing one of them in future. The four possibilities are:

- A tourism tax (probably a per night charge on overnight accommodation in Wales)
- A disposable plastics tax (aimed at disposable coffee cups and the like)
- A vacant land tax (to discourage ‘land banking’ by developers)
- A new levy to support social care.
Politicians in Westminster don’t care about Wales or have a clue about what’s important here. Why bother speaking up?

Thursday 16th November
Start at 6pm | Buffet from 5:15pm | Finishing at 8pm |

Catrin Finch Centre,
Mold Road, Wrexham, LL11 2AW

Is that true and how can we make sure the people who are making decisions about our lives know, and act on, what’s important to us?

With Brexit ever closer on the horizon... A Question Time style section on what Brexit means for democracy in Wales.

Local Members of Parliament, Ian Lucas and Susan Elan Jones, will be joining AVOW, TCC and Wrexham Youth Service for our UK Parliament Week event, dedicated to these questions.

To book your place and submit a question at wrexhamspeaks.eventbrite.co.uk or call one of the organisations below:

AVOW
Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham
Gynginistiaiad Abodau Cymunedol Wrecsam
Tel: 01978 312556
Charity Number: 1086434
Company Limited by Guarantee Number: 2993429

Wrexham Youth & Play Service
Tel: 01978 317956

Gwasanaeth Ysgolion gyda Rheoli
Gwastad Ysgolion yn Y Gorsafion
Tel: 01978 262588
Charity Number: 1086484
Company Limited by Guarantee Number: 433853

TCC
To file a complaint or report unfair treatment, call 01978 385111 or email info@wrexham.gov.uk

BBC AND HYPERLOCAL NEWS IN WALES

During October, Ofcom – which from 2018 takes over as the regulator of the BBC, in common with other broadcasters – published its new operating licence and performance framework for the BBC. Cytûn had responded to the consultation regarding the draft versions of these, and our response is extensively quoted in Ofcom’s response to the consultation. We are, however, disappointed that Ofcom has not made any changes regarding the key concerns we raised that BBC Wales and BBC Cymru, both on television and radio, are not obliged to produce as many programmes or as much news coverage as the equivalent services in Scotland and Northern Ireland; and that BBC Parliament is required to broadcast only 300 hours per year from all three devolved parliaments put together.

However, the 2018-19 and 2019-20 Welsh Government budgets include £100,000 each year to fund new hyperlocal news ventures with support via Business Wales. The Assembly’s Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee is currently conducting a consultation about this proposed expenditure.

FAITH AND POLITICS – INVITATION FROM MATTHEW REES

Between 2013-2016 I conducted research as part of my doctoral thesis looking at how faith-based organizations in the U.K. have engaged with the devolved institutions. This research specifically looked at the structures, strategies and effectiveness of FBOs in Wales and Northern Ireland. Now that the research has been completed, I am looking to share its findings on Wales with those who took part in the research and with practitioners in the faith sector more widely. I am keen to spend some time presenting the research and then creating space for discussion around the conclusions and reflections. I also look forward to hearing the thoughts of those who engage as part of this sector day in day out and to discuss together how this research might help us think where the sector might go with its engagement in the future. With political devolution in Wales having reached its 20th anniversary, what better time to have this conversation?

The seminar will be held on Tuesday January 30 2018 at 1.30-4.30 in the Baptist College, Cardiff CF24 3AT. RSVP to Gethin Rhys if you wish to attend (gethin@cytun.cymru). You are welcome to forward this invitation, but recipients need to reply to Gethin if they wish to attend.

CONTACTING THE CYTÛN POLICY OFFICER

Parch./Revd Gethin Rhys - Swyddog Polisi/Policy Officer
Cytûn - Eglwysy Ynghyd yng Nghymru/Churches Together in Wales
58 Richmond Road, Caerdydd/Cardiff, CF24 3AT
Tel: 029 2046 4378 Mudol/mobile: 07889 858062
E-bost/E-mail: gethin@cytun.cymru    @CytunNew

Hapus i gyfathrebu yn Gymraeg ac yn Saesneg. Happy to communicate in Welsh and English

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