

Joint meeting of Wales Church Leaders and Cytûn Trustees, 19 October 2023

In pursuance of one key element of Cytûn's mission statement, "helping the churches to arrive at a common mind and make decisions together" and in a similar way to some others of Britain and Ireland's national ecumenical instruments, the Cytûn Trustees invited Wales' Church leaders to come together for a conversation about the future direction of Cytûn : Churches Together in Wales.

Such a meeting had not happened for fourteen years and there had inevitably been many changes in denominational personnel during that time. It was hugely encouraging that many of Cytûn's Category A member churches were represented at the meeting as well as the Chairs of other ecumenical trans-denominational bodies, the Free Church Council of Wales, Cyngor Ysgolion Sul and Commission of Covenanted Churches. Category A members who had presented their apologies included the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, Church of Pentecost UK, Indian Orthodox Church and Church of God. It should be acknowledged that this means that no Pentecostal or ethnic minority voices were present, to the huge regret of the staff of Cytûn.

The provocation for the discussion was a lecture delivered by Cytûn Chief Executive, Siôn Brynach, in August 2023 entitled "[Scaling the second mountain : the future for ecumenism in Wales?](#)". In that lecture the key communication questions were the ones highlighted – who, what, why, when, where and how - with the lecture highlighting in particular the pivotal importance of the first three of those questions – who, what and why.

The meeting began with a Bible Study, led by Rev Dr Susan Durber, World Council of Churches President from Europe, with her key text being the Epistle to the Philippians and focusing in particular on the second chapter with its injunctions to the faithful to be of one mind and "Let each of you look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others". She reflected on the three main themes of Paul's letter: joy, humility and unity. Joy when they were feeling depressed, humility when they were feeling humiliated, unity when there was division.

She cited the work of David Jasper (Scottish Episcopal Church – retired Professor of Literature and Theology), someone who has been both a fearless critic of the Church, and at the same time a faithful priest. He can, quite readily, describe 'the West' as post-Christian in one sense, but he believes in the possibility of 'the rediscovery of Christianity in a manner that is as yet barely articulated'. He urges us to let go of our nostalgic adherence to the ecclesial ruins of the past' and to embrace something more like 'an openness to the other that has its roots in kenosis' – echoing the gracious self-emptying of God into the world (Phil 2!). He says that in a secularised Europe, Christianity has been fighting a losing battle for its institutional recognition and for space in the public square – but he is *glad that Christianity is losing that fight* for the same kind of reason as Paul articulates in the letter to the Philippians – followers of Jesus should be seeking NEITHER the strength of a former Christendom NOR the power of the modern day nation state. We are about weakness and self-giving... he says. This is who we are.

She also drew parallels between Paul's injunctions in the epistle and the foot washing account in chapter thirteen of the Gospel according to John, as well as the text of the Unity Statement of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. That emphasises that "the love of Christ in the source of the ecumenical movement" which leads in turn to the "vital search for agreement in faith, the working together in service to the world, the walking of the way of discipleship together; all these are stirred by the love of Christ, who moves our hearts through the Holy Spirit." That statement closes by encouraging "the search for unity that is inspired by love and rooted in deep and mutual relationships [that become in the end] ecumenism of the heart".

Before the main discussion, Cytûn's Policy Officer, Revd Gethin Rhys, gave a presentation outlining some of the key insights arising from the figures of the 2021 census and relation to religious adherence in Wales.

The discussions took place in 5 groups, with the church leaders meeting in groups of 4-5 and the Cytûn staff in a separate group. Each group addressed four key questions, with the opportunity to also consider a final supplementary question "Any other matters to consider arising from the August lecture or from your discussions?"

The remainder of this report will consider the answers given within the group discussion to each of the remaining four questions in turn and will conclude by trying to identify some of the key themes for further future discussion and development by the Cytûn Trustees and national Church leaders. The discussions took place under Chatham House rules, so no comments are attributed to any individual.

Question 1 - What is the purpose of Cytûn in the light of the current religious landscape? Please see pages 2-6 of the lecture.

Question 2 - What does it mean to us in Wales to break free as denominations, and indeed as ecumenical instruments, from the stories we tell ourselves and give us our identity to be able to turn instead to the story God has for us? Has the time come for us to decide that some of the structures of the past are hindering us rather than supporting us in working together? Indeed, is there a future for Cytûn? See pages 8-10 of the lecture.

Many of the groups discussed questions 1 and question 2 at the same time, and so feedback on both questions will be considered together. An e-mail from an individual who didn't attend had emphasised the need to address the 'why'? question, and this was addressed by several of the groups, with key answers being as follows:

- As one group noted, "God's story in Wales is Cytûn. We have strength through being together". There was a consensus that this was the key answer to the why question, and that there was a future for Cytûn. However, there was a recognition that some of the other ecumenical instruments were having to consider existential questions at this time, with the Commission for Covenanted Churches being referenced, having reached its 48th year, and the goal of denominational structural unity seeming as far away as ever. Cytûn was seen therefore as a compromise or halfway house in this journey towards structural unity, with a focus on boosting cooperation between

denominations and encouraging action and participation rather than having as its foundational goal the establishment of structural unity. Several groups expressed the view that if Cytûn didn't exist then it would have to be created (or re-created) with the example of Scotland being cited. In Scotland, Cytûn's sister instrument, ACTS, had been terminated by its member churches, but they had been unable legally to wind up ACTS, and had now created a Scottish Church Leaders' Forum with similar aims.

- The goal remains a pilgrimage journey towards unity, but this unity doesn't imply uniformity. In the meantime, it is about action to make the Good News more evident across the nation.
- It was felt that both Siôn's lecture and Susan's Bible Study session had allowed participants to see ecumenical work differently. Do we have to see ecumenism as having failed because structural unity hasn't taken place? Did we set ourselves up for failure 100 years ago because of the focus on structures? On the other hand, is the success of the movement as obvious as it should be and do we remember where we've come from? While the 1925 churches peace petition to the USA didn't have all the current Cytûn members as signatories, this can be seen perhaps as the first example of ecumenical activity in Wales. While it is important not to be too wedded to the stories of the past, it is also important to appreciate the treasures that we have in our history books.
- There was a recognition that the vitality and energy of the 1980s in relation to ecumenism had largely dissipated and so we need to revisit the 'mission' of the ecumenical instruments that grew from those times. However, the fact that we're still talking should be seen as a success. Out of that talking can we find commonality to present to the world?
- We can get set in our denominational ways, with one striking comment being that without ecumenical instruments, we can become too inward looking and dominated by a 'church of the Lord' mentality rather than focusing on 'the Lord of the church'. Mainstream churches are busy keeping the show on the road and not seeing ecumenism as a way of doing that, as well as a tendency towards empire building.
- Cytûn provides a framework for churches to come together to have key conversations: commonality may be what allows us to best serve our society.
- Cytûn has a national role in bringing church leaders together - with no individual church leader taking an obvious lead, which would undermine the principle of commonality. It was felt that there should be an annual church leaders meeting in order to build the relationships that are vital to the ecumenical journey (possibly a 24-hour retreat), and a frustration that this had not happened for 14 years.

- Can Cytûn be a space beyond the denominations to facilitate different discussions? Could it be a place for people to meet and talk as part of facilitated discussions? Could the ecumenical movement be the place of 'speaking' – lively, open and honest facilitated discussions immediately relating to the 'how'? It was recognised that there was a tension in Cytûn's constitution between Cytûn being led and directed by its member churches, but churches expecting to be fed and/or led by Cytûn.
- Several groups felt that the constitutional priorities for Cytûn should be reconsidered with a view to reducing the number in the constitution from 8 to around 3 or 4, thus avoiding the danger of too many priorities and achieving none of them. However, others felt that Cytûn's 8 mission statements encapsulate what we are about.
- The view was expressed that Cytûn has an important role in bringing the international and UK-wide perspective to the national and local as exemplified by the Chief Executive's video reports from the CEC General Assembly in Tallinn in June and the reference to many of the keynote speeches from that event in his August lecture.
- There was a strong feeling that Cytûn has a role to offer a prophetic voice into Wales and Welsh society thus speaking the words of Jesus both to the nation and in the wider UK context and standing in solidarity with the grieving, the suffering, the lost, the fearful – because we as the churches are suffering this as well.
- Also in offering the good news (Good News!) into these situations. A key question is how can Cytûn facilitate some things that wouldn't otherwise happen?
- Most discussion groups emphasised the importance of local Cytûn groups while recognising that they couldn't exist without the overall umbrella national body. Local Cytûn groups can be important places for key conversations to take place, and Cytûn provides a coherence to enable this, through worship, quarterly meetings, information and news sharing - a coming together to share things that are happening in the community and to share news and communicate about them. Many also have an emphasis on the practical – doing things – e.g. prison chaplaincy, feeding the homeless, 'Baby basics' and so on. However, there was a recognition that in some parts of Wales, Cytûn's local groups had completely disappeared not least because of the social impact of Covid and the related lockdown and so it has become a struggle for the churches to speak together locally. A lack of local leadership to bring churches together is also evident in many areas. In some places, only the Christian Aid Committee brings churches together, once a year. But there was a recognition that many Cytûn groups have emerged from local Christian Aid committees and vice versa. Local ecumenism varies across Wales and Cytûn has a role to sponsor, support and revitalize local ecumenism.

Question 3 - Does the vision outlined on pages 11+12 resonate at all with you? If it does, how might this be manifest practically?

- Practically, does the church have a role in encouraging the integrity of secular leaders and can the ecumenical movement model show us how to graciously disagree? The image of the second mountain in the lecture is helpful: coming of age of Cytûn and our mission can change our perspective. We must keep climbing second mountain: not enough to say, 'I've done that one, not doing another one!' However, climbing same mountain over and over may not benefit anyone! There was a recognition that there was something powerful in Susan's Bible Study with its emphasis on returning to example of Jesus (to which we can all relate and have in common). If we stray away from that we become more fragmented by our diversity – with diversity become fragmentation rather than celebrating difference. If we drift from bringing others to Jesus it becomes infighting.
- We could make a massive difference to society in Wales if we put our minds to it and if we acted together. Could we choose one or two significant causes to focus on together? We spread ourselves so thinly across issues. Could Cytûn ("the privileged instrument") bring us together for work on e.g. climate change - or could a denomination be entrusted on behalf of us all to do this kind of thing? e.g. PCW for pioneer ministry, Church in Wales for The Ecumenical and Inter-faith Officers' Network, URC for climate change etc.? Take an issue a year and focus on it and aim to make it self-sustaining for a year.
- Reflecting on Susan's Bible Study, how can we together speak joy in our society today (aware that many 'helping' organisations in UK are not overtly Christian e.g. Samaritans, Trussell Trust etc)? How too might Cytûn respond to need locally, regionally and nationally?
- Could Cytûn provide a forum to have facilitated and mediated discussions on hot topics as sexuality and gender identity, or other topics such as the educational curriculum? There was a recognition that there was a serious lack of resources to inform discussion on a whole range of issues. Should the churches in Wales be encouraging the Christian Enquiry Agency – first established by Churches Together in England to expand their provision to include materials relating to Wales and material in Welsh? It is about Christianity not denominations in the context of evangelism.
- How might Cytûn be enabling the churches to work together to reflect 'resonance' as outline by Hartmut Rosa, reflecting our 'authenticity'?

Question 4 - What are the finance and resource implications arising from your discussion?

- One group made it clear that they felt that it was time for the denominations to contribute for specific projects in addition to subscription. The Cytûn trustees need to take more responsibility for its work, and staff should be able to use the Trustees to take a lead on certain issues or instead develop working groups that could be

focussed on aspects of mission or particular tasks. Individual denominations or a particular Trustee could take a lead with the support of their denomination, and that denomination then providing at least some of the resources for fulfilling that task. However, these should be decided collectively, rather than one denomination taking the lead, and then inviting others to join them which was seen as undermining ecumenism, because of the lack of collective decision-making.

- There was a consensus that “We feel blessed to have people of the ability of our Cytûn paid staff to move the agenda forward” and that many of the tasks undertaken by Cytûn such as its policy work, distilling what is happening politically in Wales through a theological lens, was something that benefits all member churches. There was universal agreement that there is a need for roles in Cytûn national body to be full time paid employees. Finances should contribute towards ‘person power’ which is key, but that current resources did not allow the employment of any further staff, and that employing people without adequate resources for them to fulfil their roles properly and meaningfully was pointless and a catalyst for frustration.
- However, concerns were expressed around the tables regarding diminishing resources in the participating denominations and a recognition that ecumenism for most denominations is a secondary goal and consequently a second tier call on their budget. How do we time-table things and make the ecumenical tasks a priority for our member denominations? How can we work together to face what for some feels like an existential moment of questioning about future survival? How can we support one another through this, rather than succumb to rivalry and denial?
- Once lost Cytûn would be almost impossible to recreate and something huge would be lost if Cytûn were to disappear.

Any Other Matters?

A question was asked as to Cytûn’s role in resourcing churches for worship, and reference was made to *Tymhorau’r Gogoniant* and the booklet produced for the millennium. Time for us to focus on prayer and worship again (to resource us in our witness and service!). However, there was a recognition that the resources to realise this didn’t exist at present.

Final Reflections and Next Steps

General comments

This was an encouraging and positive meeting with an overwhelming feeling of it being a time to focus once more on ecumenical matters and a feeling of a new season being at hand. However, this could mean that as churches we need to make brave decisions as to whether all Wales’ ecumenical instruments should continue, or whether energy and resources should

be focused on one.

There was a strong consensus that personal connections were key, and that an ‘ecumenism of the heart’ (the text of the Unity Statement of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches) was a pivotal element in building areas of cooperation and moving towards visible unity.

Despite the positive nature of the discussion, how do we time-table things and make the ecumenical tasks a priority for our member denominations? Has the time come to shift our focus away from structures, to relationships and to actions, with those actions addressing the needs of our society? What are those needs?

How might Cytûn be enabling the churches to work together to reflect ‘resonance’ as outlined by Hartmut Rosa, reflecting our ‘authenticity’ and mutual honesty? Can Cytûn be a space beyond the denominations to facilitate different discussions? Could it be a place for people to meet and talk as part of facilitated discussions? Could the ecumenical movement be the place of “speaking” lively facilitated discussions immediately relating to the ‘how’?

Practically, does the church have a role in holding secular leaders to integrity and can the ecumenical movement model show us how to graciously disagree? Could Cytûn provide a forum to discuss such hot topics as sexuality and gender identity, or other topics such as the educational curriculum?

How might Cytûn respond to need locally, regionally and nationally?

Action points

- There was a recognition that the denominations had to increase their contributions to Wales’ national ecumenical instrument if it was to continue, since almost all denominations had seen no increase in their contributions to Cytûn in over a decade. With inflation in 2023 being over 10% in some months, this had meant a significant material diminution in the working budget of Cytûn during the past decade.
- Cytûn trustees may wish to consider the format of future meetings of church leaders, with a strong suggestion that Wales should follow the example of Ireland and host a 24-hour retreat for church leaders in October 2024, with speakers invited to present provocations and theological reflections with the aim of encouraging greater future cooperation between denominations.
- There was also a strong feeling that we need to move from a situation where one denomination takes the lead on a given topic, and then invites other denominations to join in the project. Rather we should jointly decide on priorities, with different denominations then taking the lead on different aspects of that priority, or being given the lead on specific projects, with the aim of benefitting all Cytûn’s members.

- Should the churches in Wales be encouraging the Christian Enquiry Agency - first established by Churches Together in England - to expand their provision to include materials relating to Wales and material in Welsh?
- How too might we encourage the revitalisation of local groups, and encourage the emergence and development of local leaders in the ecumenical movement?

This report will be shared with all participants at the 19 October 2023 meeting and will be published on the Cytûn website. It will also be discussed at the February 2024 meeting of the Cytûn trustees for further reflection and action.
