

The Priorities for CEC 2009-2015

A Response to the Work Programme by the Delegation from the Churches of Wales

Our delegation believes that CEC is a vital instrument in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in 21st century Europe. It gives those of us who are on the geographical peripheries of our continent an opportunity to engage in ecumenical dialogue not only with those who belong to similar Christian tradition to ourselves, but also with others whose traditions are less well known to us. We value the diversity of CEC, and it is for this reason that we would welcome the exploration of some ecumenical formation in Europe that would encompass all Christians, not only mainstream Protestants but also those who belong to the Pentecostal and the Roman Catholic traditions. We feel that there is much in the social and political life of Europe today on which all Christians can speak with a common voice which would demonstrate to our shared institutions the valuable insights that our churches can offer to the shaping of our continent and our world.

Whereas the political institutions of Europe are relatively new, the nations that they serve are old, as is their Christian heritage. Our country of Wales is an ancient European nation with a Christian heritage stretching back at least to the fourth century. It has only recently, however, for the first time in five hundred years, gained a measure of autonomy. Since the advent of political devolution in 1999, churches in Wales have found a new role and a new way of working. Welsh churches approach engagement with political institutions not on the basis of traditional establishment power, access and privilege models but on the basis of a faith informed service, caring as best they can for the environment and vulnerable communities such as the socially disadvantaged, the poor and displaced peoples. We are confident that this will continue to be true of all the member churches of CEC as we face together the challenges of the next six years.

The *Government of Wales Act 1998* ensured that the new Welsh Assembly was shaped in all that it does by having to pay due regard to human rights, equal opportunities and sustainable development. Aspiring to hold meaningful conversations with the national community it serves, the Welsh Assembly Government has sought to maintain meaningful conversations with local government, the business community and the voluntary sector. Faith communities have a seat on the Third Sector Voluntary Partnership Council and the Faith Communities Forum meets every six months with Wales' First Minister and opposition party leaders. No other aspect of Welsh life has such formal access to Government in Wales. In this contact with the state, churches

increasingly stand alongside other faith communities both in conversation and public celebration. Using this as a model, we would suggest that CEC should seek meaningful conversations with decision makers within the European Union on issues of human rights, equal opportunities and sustainable development and that it should explore the possibility of making joint representations on these issues with other faiths, whenever possible.

Wales specific churches have played a continuing but evolving role in terms of preserving the Welsh language and its changing communities and cultures. Churches have also played a crucial part in ensuring that Wales sees itself increasingly as a welcoming place fit for a modern, diverse and sophisticated people charged continually by the divine calling to renew minds and identities. Wales, as a bilingual nation with a large non-native born population (mainly from other parts of the UK), without an established church or cultural orthodoxy and possessing a young expression of statehood, stands uniquely placed in a modern Europe to hold meaningful conversations around identity and power. We believe that CEC should strive for a Europe that maintains its rich linguistic and cultural diversity but also evolves as an integrated whole that is constantly renewed by its common Christian values.

In Wales, one of the more interesting aspects of embracing our new way of working is how the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission now turns to us to hold conversations around 'religion and belief' as a new strand in equalities legislation. It is significant that the first conversation around 'religion and belief' and 'sexual orientation' were held successfully in Cardiff. Wales' own complexities and vulnerabilities may well have made it uniquely placed to hold conversations which command a grasp of complexity and a striving towards consensus in the face of more powerful and entrenched hegemonies, especially in the modern media, that drive crucial conversations towards simplicity and conflict. We support CEC's objective to continue to assert human rights in general and to safeguard in particular the rights of vulnerable groups.

A small nation such as Wales may have no other alternative in terms of establishing a national identity other than to define itself primarily by how its diverse peoples respect and value each other. Wales' own unique diversity and vulnerability affords it no other orthodoxy. This may well be equally true of European identity. We are convinced that the imperative to love our neighbour as we do ourselves should inform all future work undertaken by CEC.

Nowhere perhaps is that imperative more crucial than in the dialogue between the churches themselves. The five Covenanted Churches in Wales have signed an agreement committing themselves to a fuller sharing in one another's ministries, making the best possible use of the provisions of each church; always undertaking new work jointly, except where in conscience they must do so separately; pooling resources in order to provide a united witness to Wales; and listening to what the nation is saying to the Church. In a European context, we would welcome meaningful theological dialogue between the various confessions within CEC, a sharing of spirituality and worship life, and, increasingly, the sharing of ministry and ministerial training. In all these things, while we long for the people of Europe to hear what we have to say to them, we might benefit also from hearing what the people of Europe have to say to us in our fragmented mission.