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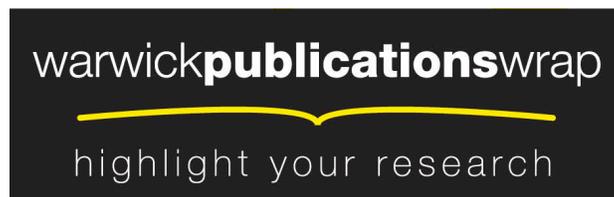
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# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY COHESION IN WALES: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY THE STANDING ADVISORY COUNCILS ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

*Tania ap Siôn*

## ABSTRACT

*The provision within each Local Authority of a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACREs) is a statutory requirement under the Education Reform Act 1988 designed to monitor the implementation of the locally determined syllabus of religious education. As part of their statutory constitution SACREs bring together representation of Christian denominations and religious groups active within the Local Authority. Drawing on a recent survey conducted throughout the 22 Local Authorities in Wales, this paper demonstrates the significant contribution made by SACREs to inter-faith dialogue and community cohesion in Wales relevant to the Welsh Government's community cohesion strategy, 'Getting on Together: A Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales' (2009). It is argued that any erosion of the capacity of SACREs in Wales to connect with local representatives of diverse religious traditions may carry unintended consequences of damaging the community cohesion strategy.*

## INTRODUCTION

While Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) were originally established for a well-defined and highly specific purpose in relation to the local determination of the religious education curriculum in England and Wales, they may in recent years have taken on an additional and significant role in engendering interfaith dialogue and in promoting community cohesion in Wales. The purpose of the present paper is to explore this possibility both conceptually and empirically.

**Religious education and the role of SACREs**

The statutory framework for the provision of religious education within the state-maintained sector of schools in England and Wales has its roots in the long history of the involvement of the Christian denominations in the provision of schools (Cruickshank, 1963; Murphy, 1971; Chadwick, 1997) before the Education Act of 1870 introduced the mechanism for creating Board Schools (Rich, 1970). The settlement brokered by the Education Act 1944 between the Churches and the state for the post-war reconstruction of the national educational system ensured the statutory place for religious education within all state-maintained schools alongside the creation of two forms in which church schools could remain distinctive within that system, voluntary aided status and voluntary controlled status (Dent, 1947). According to this settlement, the nature and content of religious education in non-denominational schools and in voluntary controlled schools would be by local determination and expressed through the Local Agreed Syllabuses of Religious Education.

In order to facilitate local determination the Education Act 1944 empowered each Local Education Authority to constitute two statutory bodies: the Standing Conference to agree the local syllabus and the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) to oversee and to maintain the implementation of the local syllabus. The consultative process and local representation of both the Standing Conferences and the Advisory Councils were achieved by a structure of multiple committees. In Wales three committees were required, comprising the Local Authority, Teachers, and the religious denominations represented within the local area. In England a fourth committee gave a distinctive voice to the Established Church, no longer at the point of the Education Act 1944 relevant within Wales.

The notion of local determination for religious education remained such a powerful symbol of the continuing voice of the Christian Churches in the state-maintained system of education in England and Wales that the Education Reform Act 1988 left the provision unchanged. As a consequence the Education Reform Act 1988 evolved the nomenclature of the Basic Curriculum comprising Religious Education and the National Curriculum. While all other subjects in England and Wales now became subject to a national syllabus, religious education remained locally determined within the continuing framework of the Standing Conference and the Advisory Council for Religious Education (Cox and Cairns, 1989). The difference, however, was that, while the Education Act 1944 empowered each Local Authority to establish a SACRE, the Education Reform Act 1988 made this a statutory duty. The current statutory requirement for SACREs in Wales is set out in paragraph 390 of the

Education Act 1996. According to this requirement all three statutory committees are defined as follows. Committee A: representatives of Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations, reflecting the principle religious traditions of the local area. Committee B: Teacher representatives. Committee C: Local Authority representatives.

In both England and Wales the work of the SACREs has been assisted by non-statutory national co-ordinating bodies, in England the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) and in Wales the Wales Association of SACREs (WASACRE). Working outside the statutory framework, each of these national associations offers two forms of support for local SACREs. On the one hand, they are able to provide professional support and advice to facilitate local working. On the other hand, they are able to represent and coordinate local voices in national debate.

As originally conceived SACREs offered an opportunity for local churches and local government to collaborate and co-operate. As the religious climate and culture of Wales and England have grown more diverse, so the composition of SACREs has broadened to include representatives of other faith traditions visible within the local authority. As originally conceived, SACREs may have carried the added unintentional benefit of promoting Christian ecumenism within the local area. As now currently operating, SACREs may be carrying the added unintentional benefit of promoting interfaith dialogue and enhancing community cohesion.

**Interfaith dialogue and community cohesion in Wales**

From the 1960s the secularisation thesis promoted the notions of the privatization of religion and the withdrawal of religion from the public domain (Wilson, 1966). This view is still maintained by commentators like Bruce (2002) in his provocatively titled book, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Another view, however, speaks in terms of the emergence of post-secularity and the re-emergence of the significance of religion within the public square. This case is well argued, for example, in the collection of essays edited by Ziebertz and Reigel (2008a), *Europe: Secular or post-secular?* In the introductory essay to this collection, Ziebertz and Riegel (2008b) explore the concept of post-secular and the contribution of religion to societal cohesion, and conclude that 'both the plurality of the religions and their status influence societal cohesion in nation-states and Europe. … religion is able to affect societal cohesion in very different ways; it therefore represents a challenge for European society' (p. 22). In the same collection of essays, Francis (2008) also discusses the renewed

appreciation in the twenty-first century of the persisting influence of religion in shaping personal and social identity and in forming cultural identity. He illustrates these points through a study of empirical research concerned with mapping the association between religion and attitudinal areas of significance to the public square in post-secular Britain. He concludes that 'sufficient evidence has been assembled … to challenge any notion that religion is irrelevant to shaping the diverse cultural future of Britain'. On the basis of such evidence, he argues that 'characterization of Britain as secular is inadequate and erroneous, and that the alternative construct of post-secularity provides a more adequate and more accurate description of the empirical reality' (p.189).

Political recognition of the social significance of religion within the public square is clearly demonstrated by the way in which the Welsh Government discusses diversity and community cohesion in contemporary Wales. This is evident, for example, in the two reports, *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (2009) and *Respect and Resilience: Developing community cohesion, a common understanding for schools and their communities* (2011). In *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (2009) the term 'community cohesion' is employed in a functional sense, which remains grounded in practice through its specific frame of reference. The document is concerned with identifying issues that have been shown to impact on 'cohesion' in local areas with the aim of helping local government explore these in relation to their own contexts in order to plan ways of promoting and maintaining 'cohesion' (p. 3). 'Community' is broadly understood as relating to a group who lives in the same area together, groups of people who come together because of shared interest and experience, and groups which have regional and national identities. Within this context, 'religion' is located alongside gender, ethnic background, disability, age, and sexual orientation as: individual experiences that can have a significant impact on perceptions and experience of cohesion; reasons for 'exclusion or isolation'; and, in extreme circumstances, underlying factors in 'hate crimes'. In addition, the document identifies Religious Education for three- to nineteen-year-olds as being important for learning to value other cultures and traditions, with particular reference to 'developing an understanding and respect for world religions and the impact that they have on individuals and society in order to support community cohesion' (p. 25).

In *Respect and Resilience: Developing community cohesion, a common understanding for schools and their communities* (2011), community cohesion is further developed in relation to schools and focuses on the two related strategic activities of

promoting and maintaining community cohesion and preventing violent extremism. In this document 'community cohesion' is explicitly defined as:

> Community cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to community cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another. (p.13)

A close connection is made between promoting and maintaining cohesive communities and with creating 'resilient' communities, the latter being concerned with the well being of vulnerable learners or groups who are at risk of being drawn into violent extremist activity. In a similar way to the *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (2009), this document targeting schools also emphasizes the contributory role of Religious Education in the prevention of violent extremism strategy.

## The contemporary role of SACREs

Educational developments in both England and Wales, in very different ways, may be engaged in undermining and dismantling the operation of SACREs. In England the move is to take more and more schools out of local authority control. In Wales the move is to reduce local authority advisory support for subject specialisation (including religious education on which the coherent implementation of local determination depends) and to share resources across local authorities through the mechanism of regional consortia arrangements (which could reduce the visible connection between SACREs and the local communities). For such reasons it becomes a matter of importance to establish in what ways, if at all, the role of SACREs in determining and supporting religious education contribute effectively at the local level to interfaith dialogue and community cohesion within a religiously plural society. Although SACREs play an interesting and important role both within the structure of Local Authorities and within statutory provision of religious education, the operation of these bodies has remained largely invisible within the research literature, apart from a study by Rose (1998) who conducted a survey of forty-six SACREs in England exploring how a 'faith-group' gains representation on the committee.

On 12 June 2009 the Inter Faith Network for the UK and the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) for England held a seminar in Coventry on the theme 'Local Interfaith Organisations and Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education: working together for

understanding and community cohesion'. One of the objectives of the seminar was to share the findings of a NASACRE and Inter Faith Network for the UK survey exploring the relationship and collaboration between SACREs and local interfaith organisations. This survey included two questionnaires: one for local interfaith organisations in England and Wales and one for SACREs in England. The Inter Faith Network for the UK and NASACRE published the findings of the survey and a full report on the seminar in 2010 (pp. 72-73). The findings demonstrated that a significant number of SACREs had positive relations with local interfaith organisations and collaborated on a wide range of specific projects with particular reference to youth activities and response to specific local and regional issues.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Against this background, the Wales Association of SACREs saw benefit in a modified version of the SACRE questionnaire being distributed to the 22 SACREs in Wales. This decision to administer the questionnaire (with modifications for Wales) was influenced by two main factors. First, SACREs in Wales were not included in the original survey, and the survey focused on areas of interest to the work of WASACRE and SACREs in Wales, with particular reference to 'community cohesion'. WASACRE and SACREs in Wales are aware of the distinctive role that they play in community cohesion both from the perspective of their inherent constitutions (through the representation of a variety of faith communities on SACRE and WASACRE, and the nature of the curriculum areas with which they are concerned) and from the perspective of their current activities (through their contribution to the REsilience project and the Celebrating RE month as well as associations with the Inter Faith Network for the UK, the Religious Education Council for England and Wales, the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education, and the Inter-European Commission on Church and School).

Second, it was recognized that Wales is different from England, and the original SACRE questionnaire would need to be modified if it were to access current practice relevant to community cohesion for SACREs in Wales. The original SACRE questionnaire focused on SACRE relationships with local interfaith groups, which are far less numerous in Wales than in England. Therefore, the questionnaire distributed to SACREs in Wales was re-conceptualized to include a broader understanding of SACRE relations with the local community. Specifically, the survey was designed to map the relationships between SACREs

and their local communities in relation to four specific areas: SACRE representation on Committee A (Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations); SACRE co-opted representation; SACRE relations with Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations; SACRE involvement with local interfaith organisations and other local interfaith initiatives.

Set within this context, the current study aims to investigate empirically the contribution made by SACREs in Wales to interfaith dialogue and community cohesion relevant to the Welsh Government's community cohesion strategy.

## METHOD

### Procedure

Welsh and English versions of the questionnaire were emailed to the SACRE clerks of all 22 SACREs in Wales in April 2010, with a request for the SACRE questionnaire to be discussed and completed in the SACREs' summer term meeting and returned to the Secretary of WASACRE by 20 July 2010.

### Instrument

The questionnaire contained four sections. The first section concerned the membership of Committee A, representation of Christian denominations and other religious traditions and their denominations which reflect the principle religious traditions of the area. The second section concerned co-opted SACRE membership. The third section concerned SACREs' relations with Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations in the area. The fourth section concerned SACREs' relations with local interfaith organisations and involvement with their local interfaith initiatives or projects. The fifth section invited any additional comments the respondents wished to make.

### Sample

Of the 22 SACREs in Wales, fully completed questionnaires were returned by 21 SACREs.

**Analysis**

The questionnaires were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first instance, a quantitative overview was produced using SPSS. Following the quantitative analysis, a content analysis categorised and described the written responses to each question.

**RESULTS**

**SACRE representation on Committee A**

All 21 SACREs identified their representatives on Committee A (that is, representatives of Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations, reflecting the principle religious traditions of the area). All 21 SACREs had places for one or more representatives from Free Churches and the Church in Wales; 20 SACREs had a place for a representative from the Roman Catholic Church; and one SACRE had a place for a Pentecostal Church representative. For other religions, there was a Muslim place on 9 SACREs, a Sikh place on seven SACREs, a Hindu place on seven SACREs, a Jewish place on six SACREs, a Buddhist place on four SACREs, and a Baha'i place on three SACREs. Those SACREs with representatives on Committee A from other religions in addition to Christian denominations tended to be located in the more densely and diversely populated south-east Wales, and a northeast Wales SACRE was seeking to extend membership to other religions in response to the shifting demographics of the area.

**Securing representation on Committee A**

Of the 21 SACREs, 16 SACREs identified an issue with securing appropriate representation for Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations, four SACREs had not experienced any such issue, and one SACRE did not respond to the question. Among SACREs identifying an issue, some related past experience where the problem had been resolved, and others described current experience where the problem had not been resolved. In terms of securing representation of Christian denominations, eight SACREs had had difficulty filling Free Church vacancies; however, in five of these cases this had been addressed successfully with the assistance of Cytûn. There were three SACREs that reported difficulties filling Roman Catholic Church vacancies.

In terms of securing representation from other religions and their denominations, nine SACREs reported that they had experienced difficulties. These difficulties were clustered around three areas: first, the problem of finding appropriate representative bodies for other religions which were able to provide assistance in identifying representatives; second, the problem of regular attendance at SACRE meetings by some members from relevant groups (including those who were already members and those who had been approached with a view to becoming members); third, the problem of small numbers belonging to other religions in the local area, which affected decisions related to definitions of appropriate local community representation.

A number of SACREs stated their commitment to ensuring adequate representation from other religions in Committee A, with some detailing their current activity in relation to this objective. Other SACREs stated that they invited individuals from non-represented religions to SACRE meetings where appropriate and included them in the convening of syllabus conferences. A number of SACREs also commented that they had used the Census statistics relating to the 'religion' question to inform their review of membership of Committee A.

Despite issues encountered by some SACREs securing appropriate representation, 15 of the 21 SACREs were confident that Committee A reflected the relevant Christian denominations and other religions and their denominations in their Local Authority, and the remaining six SACREs reported difficulties in finding representatives from specific Christian denominations and two reported difficulties in securing representation from other religions.

**Co-opted representation on SACREs**

Of the 21 SACREs, 15 SACREs had one or more co-opted members. These included individual teachers (seven SACREs), the British Humanist Association (five SACREs), RE Centres in Wales (six SACREs), Evangelical Movement Wales (three SACREs), Cyngor Ysgolion Sul Cymru (two SACREs), Welsh-medium schools (two SACREs), as well as co-options which applied to single SACREs – Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i, Sikh, Pentecostal, Religious Education Movement Wales (REMW), FE College, and HE College.

Only one of the 21 SACREs reported that it was not satisfied that its co-opted representation was appropriate for the area, indicating that SACRE would like to establish a

link with a local Initial Teacher Training institute, but no representative was available. However, of those SACREs which were satisfied with their current co-opted representation, two SACREs commented that they would welcome consideration of new co-options and one SACRE commented that although it had no co-opted members at that time, the SACRE was open to discussion about co-opted members as a result of the questionnaire.

**SACRE relations with Christian denominations and other religions**

In terms of contacts within their local area, all 21 SACREs provided a list of Christian denominations and other religions with which they had contacts. Of these, contacts were listed by 13 SACREs with both Christian denominations and other religions, seven SACREs with Christian denominations only, and one SACRE with another religion only. The SACREs that had contacts with only Christian denominations only usually tended to be in more rural areas of Wales. Almost all the SACREs (19) identified SACRE membership of Committee A as an important connection with relevant religious bodies and communities in the local area, and 12 of these also identified local community links external to SACRE.

The external contacts SACREs had in the community were drawn from a range of Christian denominations and other religions. Those that were related to Christian denominations included specific local faith communities or ecumenical bodies such as 'Cytun', 'Churches Together', or a Church Leaders' Fellowship, for example. Those that were related to other religions included specific local faith communities as well as those that brought together representatives from a number of faiths, for example, the All Faith Leaders' Gathering, local interfaith groups, and the Valleys Faith Forum. There were also a number of examples of SACREs understanding their contacts as including education institutions such as their schools with a religious character and a local HE institution which provided connections with a diverse range of contacts and this was a useful resource for the SACRE.

Where the nature of these relationships was described a number of themes emerged. First, in some cases SACRE members were involved with a particular body or a forum and reported back to the SACRE on its activity. Second, some SACREs invited these groups to make presentations in their meetings. Third, some SACREs had made contacts through working on shared initiatives, such as the Holocaust Memorial day. Fourth, some SACREs held their meetings in a different place of worship each term, which included tours and presentations by their hosts. Fifth, some SACREs held their meetings in schools with a religious character, such as Church in Wales and Roman Catholic (one SACRE received a

presentation from a Roman Catholic school about the school's philosophy, religious education and collective worship, and relationship with the local community).

In terms of contacts outside the local area, of the 21 SACREs, 17 SACREs reported that they had contacts related to Christian denominations and other religions, and provided details. Of these, contacts were cited by 12 SACREs with both Christian denominations and other religions, three SACREs with Christian denominations only, and 2 SACREs with other religions only.

The contacts SACREs had made outside the local area were wide-ranging. Among Christian-related contacts the following organisations were cited, and were usually from Wales but also on occasion from England: Christian Aid, Welsh Sunday Schools Council, Religious Education Movement Wales (REMW), Christian Education, and Cytûn, In addition, Christian denominational contacts existed through SACRE members at both a wider regional and national level.

Among both Christian-related and other religion-related contacts, some SACREs had developed contacts with a range of faith communities in different Local Authorities. In the case of some SACREs, participating in events and projects had also created these wider external links, for example, Cathedral Experience Days, the Jewish Way of Life Exhibition, and the Tapestry of Life and Faith Festival, which had enabled links with Cytûn, the Inter-faith Council for Wales, and a Buddhist community in Birmingham.

A number of SACREs reported that WASACRE brought together SACRE representatives from across Wales, which broadened their range of contacts and connected them with relevant initiatives. In addition, a number of SACREs had access to a wider range of contacts where an RE Consultant or Advisor was also involved with another SACRE or SACREs. Another source of access to various faith communities came through the educational resource material produced by various religious organisations, such as the Jewish Way of Life CD ROM, REQuest and Church in Wales material.

**SACRE involvement in local projects or activities**

Of the 21 SACREs, 18 SACREs reported about their work in projects or activities that involved Christian denominations and other religions in their local area. Of these, 16

SACREs cited projects involving both Christian denominations and other religions, while two SACREs referred to projects involving Christian denominations only. Many of these projects fell into three broad categories: projects initiated by SACREs; projects in which SACREs were committed contributors; and projects to which SACREs offered their support in other ways.

Projects initiated by SACREs included: establishing a network of faith representatives who were available to visit schools to support RE provision; composing a directory of local places of worship and communities suitable for school visits; creating pastoral care leaflets by Jewish and Baha'i faiths; organizing visits to places of worship associated with Committee A members; receiving presentations from relevant local organisations and charities about their work in the community and their relationship to schools; conducting a SACRE survey about local religious communities which resulted in a compendium of places of worship willing to host school visits; providing an Annual Lecture; organizing a rites of passage training day for year seven pupils involving a number of churches.

Projects in which SACREs are committed contributors included: Holocaust Memorial Day (and a range of events associated with this); the Tapestry of Life and Faith Festival; conferences for schools on topics such as RE and ESDGC, and community cohesion); Cathedral Experience Days; a school's interfaith forum; the GSUS Live bus visiting secondary schools in the area; an Easter labyrinth project working with a local church and primary schools to trial and to widen the project to county level.

Projects to which SACREs offered their support in other ways include: attending a range of events and encouraging their schools to participate (for example, the Anne Frank exhibition); involvement with a project for young disaffected people of the area through a SACRE member; working with Christian Aid to provide workshops and conferences to schools; launching of a replica mobile mosque which is available to schools. Other projects named but where SACRE involvement is not described included: JC2000; sacred spaces; Open Churches Network; Prayer Week; a school faith garden; and Agathos Trust work with schools.

**SACRE involvement in other local community cohesion initiatives**

Of the 21 SACREs, 15 SACREs reported their involvement in other initiatives that promote community cohesion in their local area. These initiatives included: promoting UK-wide surveys to local schools (for example, the AHRC Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity survey) and securing school participation; receiving presentations from schools and others who have participated in relevant projects (for example, Lessons from Auschwitz visits and a school's House of Religions initiative); receiving presentations on community cohesion (for example, the work of VALREC developing aspects of community cohesion in a local primary school); involvement with the Getting On Together project; having a representative from the Local Authority's Ethnic Minority Service on SACRE, who gives presentations on the Service's work in promoting community cohesion and supporting ethnic minority groups); involvement with the One Wrexham Charter; involving schools in the Local Authority's HMD activities (through SACRE teacher representatives) which SACRE members also attended; hosting a Jewish exhibition open to schools and the wider community; working with the police and members of the public to stop a anti-Muslim march in the locality.

SACREs felt that the production of resources, guidance, and training was significant. A number of SACREs noted their role in relation to agreed syllabi and support materials, which they ensured were appropriate and supported community cohesion in terms of content and local information guidance. One SACRE wrote about the small numbers of religious communities present in the Local Authority that were not Christian, and had addressed this issue by providing resources and training for schools on the use of persona dolls as well as making available RE resources on a website. Other specific examples of resources produced by SACREs included: RE support material for local non-maintained playgroups and nursery settings; a list of websites for schools for local places of worship; a DVD entitled 'Faith matters in Education' to communicate the role and work of SACRE. A number of SACREs mentioned their support of the national REsilience project, which provided training to RE teachers in areas directly relevant to community cohesion.

**Further potential for promoting community relations**

Of the 21 SACREs, fifteen thought of ways in which they could promote further their relations with Christian denominations and other religions in the local area. SACRE responses focused on the continuation of current work and activities of SACRE, and on the

exploration and development of new areas. Among these new areas, SACREs planned to approach new religious communities with a view to establishing links with SACRE and then with schools; to encourage more school visits to faith communities and faith visitors to schools; to encourage schools to promote opportunities for interfaith dialogue either within the school or across schools; to offer more interfaith days in schools; to develop the SACRE website to provide opportunities for faith communities to network, as appropriate; to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible; to discuss the use of co-opted membership to include, where relevant, other religions not represented. A number of SACRE responses referred to the significant role of the forthcoming Celebrating RE month (March 2011) for developing productive relations with local faith communities and enhancing relationships with schools.

Of the 21 SACREs, 14 SACREs thought of further ways they could promote community cohesion in their local area. A number of responses referred back to the previous question about how SACREs could promote further their relations with Christian denominations and other religions in the local area. Among the points not previously included are the following initiatives: developing the SACRE website to promote the work of SACRE and local schools; distributing the SACRE newsletter more widely; inviting officers responsible for community cohesion to address SACRE.

The results in this section show that there are strong links between SACREs' contacts with Christian denominations and other religions and SACREs' participation in activities involving different faith groups in the local community. All the SACREs involved in such activities cited their contacts with different faith groups; however, the presence of such contacts did not always predict related activity, which is seen in the case of three SACREs.

**SACREs and local interfaith involvement**

Of the 21 SACREs, ten SACREs were aware of a forum of faiths or interfaith council in their local area. These included (as identified by the SACREs): the All Faiths Leaders' Gathering, Vale of Glamorgan Interfaith Forum, interfaith group linked to VALREC, Valleys Faith Forum, community cohesion group in Torfaen, Newport Interfaith group, Newport Interfaith Council, an interfaith group meeting at the University of Glamorgan, Three Faiths Forum, interfaith organisation in Cardiff, Cardiff Christians and Jews (CCJ), and South Wales Police

Community Cohesion Group. Some of these may be references to the same group, although using different names.

One SACRE had a representative at a consultation event organised by the Inter-faith Council for Wales exploring the possibility of setting up a new regional interfaith group, and although this had not been possible at the time, the SACRE intended to continue involvement in this objective, as appropriate. A number of SACREs recognized that no such faith forum or interfaith council existed in their local area, but took the opportunity to highlight the existence of known ecumenical Christian groups. In addition, some SACREs were keen to emphasize the existence of a number of groups involving faith representatives in the locality, which were not a local forum of faiths or interfaith council. This may well indicate that for these SACREs there is a broad understanding of what may be included as an interfaith initiative.

Of the ten SACREs that were aware of a local forum of faiths or interfaith council in their local area, eight SACREs reported that one or more SACRE members were 'involved' in at least one of these groups. In all of these cases apart from one, the members were not officially representing SACRE, but were present in another capacity. This may reflect the relatively small number of representatives in relevant capacities available to SACREs, who are also actively representing other groups. It is clear from the responses given, however, that SACREs benefited from these links, and from receiving reports enabled through them.

Of the eight SACREs that were involved in at least one of these groups, three SACREs reported that they had worked with an interfaith group on a particular project. These projects included sourcing faith community members to visit schools to support religious education or collective worship; hosting visits by schools to local places of worship; developing or providing information about different faiths for a website or Local Authority publication; working together on the biennial Tapestry of Life and Faith Festival; participating in the One Wrexham Charter; and contributing to the Interfaith One World Week.

With reference to the broader notion of working on other local interfaith initiatives, four SACREs (of the 21 SACREs) reported that they had done so. These initiatives included working together on the HMD planning group; producing tours around local places of worship and a DVD about Anna Bergman (Holocaust survivor); and the annual planning for Holocaust Memorial Day.  The responses to this question may well have been relevant to

Section C (which focused on relations with the local community and community cohesion) and some of the responses in Section C may also have been relevant here. This raises the question of how the term 'interfaith' was being interpreted by SACREs in this broad context and whether other terms such as community cohesion and establishing relevant relations with different faith communities (Section C) were generally perceived as more natural descriptors of SACREs' activities.

Of the 21 SACREs, six SACREs provided feedback on their experiences of working with a local interfaith body. Of these, four SACREs had involvement with a local interfaith group and two SACREs had not. All the experiences were positive and included the observations that a SACRE had found these partnerships very rewarding for the work of RE in schools, and communication and mutual awareness enabled joint working; a SACRE welcomed further participation in the events of a local forum and the SACRE members involved would encourage more events; SACRE members involved with interfaith groups believed that they were harmonious but some members were more active than others; interfaith groups were always very keen and willing to participate in any projects; and a SACRE that had no involvement with an interfaith group or initiative would welcome such involvement, but was not aware of a local body with which to make contact (similarly, the comment that a SACRE normally makes contact on a personal basis but would welcome involvement with interfaith bodies).

**Further potential for promoting relations with local interfaith bodies**

Of the 21 SACREs, 14 SACREs reflected on ways that their SACRE could further develop relations with local interfaith bodies that would increase interfaith understanding and community cohesion. Not surprisingly, there was a relationship between SACREs' awareness of a local interfaith organisation and reflections on what SACREs could do further in this area. All ten SACREs that were aware of a local interfaith body saw this as an area to promote further. However, four SACREs that were unaware of such a local body also agreed with this statement.

For those ten SACREs who had access to interfaith organisations, the reflections included: being open to the findings and recommendations of the WASACRE survey; encouraging involvement of local interfaith bodies in the Celebrating RE month and closer

community links with schools; deciding to make formal contact with a local interfaith council; and establishing a youth SACRE which would provide an opportunity for young people to discuss relevant issues. For the four SACREs that were unaware of a local interfaith body, reflections included, making formal contact with an interfaith council in a neighbouring Local Authority and considering the feasibility and value of an interfaith forum in the local area (in light of recent local faith developments and the contribution this could make to SACRE and local schools); and looking at co-opted membership.

**Additional comments**

Of the 21 SACREs, nine SACREs offered additional comments when invited to so at the end of the questionnaire. Two main points were iterated by a number of SACREs. First. The recognition that additional good work in this area may be happening in the Local Authority of which the SACRE is unaware or not involved in directly. Therefore, the content of the survey would not reflect the whole work of the Local Authority in this area. Second, the recognition that faith groups represented in local populations differed considerably depending on location in Wales. This had an impact also on the presence of interfaith forums. Therefore, SACREs in some parts of Wales were representative of their local area, even if this did not involve other faiths in addition to Christian denominations.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has been concerned with an empirical exploration of the relationship between local SACREs in Wales and both inter-faith dialogue and community cohesion. This is an area of particular relevance to the Welsh Government's community cohesion strategy, which is focused on developing and resourcing responses at the local community level, as reflected in the publication *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). The strategy is focused around five key areas, which are identified as learning, housing, communication, promoting equality and social inclusion, and preventing violent extremism and strengthening community cohesion.

This strategy emphasises the value of local partnerships, the important role of organisations that are working at community level and readily acknowledges that the

engagement of people living in communities is vital. A community which works well together in regard to the five key areas is also a community which is likely to be resilient when external challenges arise or internal tensions develop. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009, p.3)

When compared with the situation in England, Wales has relatively few forums of faiths or interfaith councils as understood by the Interfaith Network for the UK in their publication *Inter Faith Organisations in the UK* (2009), where under ten are cited. As such, SACREs in certain locations in Wales (outside the southeast and Valleys) will be unable to benefit from establishing relations with such groups. However, it is recognised that relevant and significant inter-faith relations also exist in other contexts (for example, through SACRE membership, SACRE relations with Christian denominations and other religions, and SACRE involvement in local projects and activities concerned with both religion and community cohesion), and these should be recognised and taken seriously. When this wider perspective is considered, the results of the survey conducted by the Wales Association of SACRE provide valuable quantitative and qualitative data, which detail how SACREs are able to provide opportunities for promoting inter-faith dialogue and for enhancing community cohesion, through both their constitutional composition and their activities both within the SACRE context and with the wider local community. This was demonstrated by three of the main findings of the survey. First, the majority of SACREs were satisfied that religious denominations in their local area were appropriately represented on SACRE by an allocation of a place or places on committee A. Where local demographics did not enable this, a number of SACREs employed other methods to involve individuals from particular religious groups in SACREs' activities, which included the use of co-opted membership, places on agreed syllabus conferences, or invitations to SACRE meetings to make a specific input. Second, around two thirds of SACREs reported that they had contacts with both Christian denominations and other religions in the local area, which came either through their membership within Committee A or were external to this. Third, SACREs had been involved in a wide range of different types of activity with Christian denominations and other religions in the local area, and over three-quarters of SACREs had been involved in projects that included both Christian denominations and other religions. Some of these activities were SACRE initiatives, while others were activities that SACREs supported in a variety of ways.

The results of the survey also provide support for the notion that the more contact a body has with other groups from a variety of faith backgrounds, the greater that body's

participation is in activities involving different faith groups in the local community. SACREs are bodies which require, as part of their constitutions, the bringing together of representatives from a variety of religious denominations, and have a remit concerned with the monitoring and support of locally determined religious education in schools. This provides both a local working context and a clearly defined purpose, which enables representatives from different faith backgrounds to meet and to collaborate on initiatives and projects of common concern in relation to Religious Education and young people. It may be argued that as an offshoot of SACREs' work in fulfilling their statutory obligations, SACREs also provide a rich context for promoting positive interfaith relations and community cohesion. This is supported by the self-perception of SACREs in the survey, where around three quarters of SACREs felt that they were able to promote further their relations with Christian denominations and other religions in their local area, as well as community cohesion.

As contextualised in the introductory section on the contemporary role of SACREs, the implementation of recent educational policies in England and Wales may have the unintentional effect of challenging the ability of SACREs to monitor and to support Religious Education and Collective Worship at a local level. Governments should be aware that diminishing the role and effectiveness of SACRE (either by taking away the religious education provided by the schools away from Local Authority control or by weakening the connection between SACREs and individual local areas) may undermine coherent policy intentions to strengthen community cohesion at local level within societies that are increasing conscious of religious diversity.

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