

**“Mediation Within the Northern Ireland Conflict:
The Work of The Mediation Network for N. Ireland”**

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Mediation and Peace-Building

The Mediation Network for Northern Ireland was established in 1991 by a group of individuals who had been organising mediation training since 1986. The Network promotes the use of Third Party intervention in disputes and supports creative responses to conflict in Northern Ireland society.

In 1992, began work as the Director (and first employee) of the Mediation Network. We now employ one other practitioner, an administrator and two full time volunteers from the Mennonite Church (U.S.A.) In addition, we engage the services of ten sessional workers, principally as trainers, and we provide various support and guidance to about fifty practitioners across Northern Ireland. Within the near future we will employ two additional practitioners and an executive officer.

The Mediation Network seeks to promote a culture of Third Party intervention in conflict in Northern Ireland. We wish to foster an awareness that conflict can be ‘processed’ in ways which are positive and helpful. For too long in our society, people have lived with the notion that conflict offers two alternatives: the Fight or Flight syndrome - a belief that if you are strong enough you can fight in conflict and, if you feel too weak, you can take flight from it and engage in avoidance strategies. After more than a quarter century of violent conflict, we aim to capitalise on a

ensuring that peace-building becomes an organic phenomenon, at work at all levels of our society rather than the traditional, narrow view of peace being negotiated by political leaders alone.

should also like to say a word about mediation as a method of Non-Violence.

Non-Violence is a belief that you can promote or defend Justice by serving Truth in ways which respect the dignity and integrity of human beings.

As proponents of Non-Violent peace-building, mediators assume that in each situation of conflict everyone has a perspective which is valid and needs to be understood. Therefore, mediation is about enabling those in conflict to communicate with each other, to improve understandings and let Truth grow. When Truth is properly served, it does its own great work.

Sectors of Work

The Mediation Network has chosen five sectors in which to work within Northern Ireland society:

1. The Public Sector: training officials within state sponsored bodies such as Housing and Social Work.

2. Politics: supporting creative dialogue among political activists and developing ideas about peace-building within the political system.

3. The Justice System: engaging the Police and Prison Service who are at the coal-face of conflict in N. Ireland.

4. The Churches: providing opportunities for clergy to train and improve their capacities to intervene in communal conflict. In this respect it is worth noting that Northern Ireland has the highest rate of church attendance in Europe and, of course, religion is an historic theme of our conflict.

5. The Community: again, providing training to the voluntary sector and supporting groups working in areas of Northern Ireland where Catholic and

Protestant interfaces have produced a legacy of fear, suspicion and hatred.

We chose these sectors, partly because they reflect our own range of professional competence and partly because they have been the areas which have presented opportunities to develop mediative initiatives.

However, we support others in their activities within the school and education system, the youth sector, family life and within the work-place

Methodology

In Northern Ireland, mediation has four potential functions:

- 1 To facilitate communication
2. To improve understanding
3. To support creative thinking
4. To explore accommodations

Mediation can address any one of these functions, or indeed, all of them in sequence.

1. Formal Mediation: based on a model of mediation primarily developed within North America, with the parties in conflict sitting face to face for dialogue facilitated by the mediator acting as a neutral Third Party. Experience has taught us that our people are disinclined to participate in face to face dialogue with a mediator and that, while this model remains potentially valuable, we have had to develop more flexible ways of practising our trade.

2. Intermediation: More commonly we act as intermediaries, in situations where for various reason, the parties to a conflict do not meet. In intermediation, we undertake three tasks:

Firstly, **Information:** we bring information about the other party or disputant. This can take the form of a message from them.

Secondly, **Discussion:** we facilitate confidential discussion with one side. In

this discussion we may give analyses. It will be recognised that because of our contact with the other side (or sides) our's is an informed opinion. We are therefore able to infuse a 'Sense of the Other' to the discussion and thus encourage 'Inclusive Thinking' - a capacity to think of the situation from the point of view of the opponent.

Thirdly, Communication: we may take a message from one side to the other. While a 'communication' is largely dictated by the disputants, we are careful to elicit maximum positivity and appropriate expressions of respect. The tone of communications becomes crucially important, with the mediator seeking to foster a greater degree of mutual respect between the parties and if communication progresses to the task of exploring accommodations, both sides are able to, in effect, work together in search of a solution which is sensitive to both their needs.

We have used an Intermediation approach to our work in addressing the Parades Conflict. As our experience has grown, we have identified three important factors which help to ensure the effectiveness of Intermediation:

- A. 'Authoritative Engagement': both sides should feel confident that they speak with authority and can reasonably hope to deliver on any arrangements which might ultimately be agreed.
- B. Reciprocity: both sides should simultaneously engage in actions or undertakings which take the conflict positively forward. These might also be regarded as Confidence-building measures.
- C. Credible Communication: both sides should feel that communication, once established, is beneficial and of value. They should also feel that their integrity is protected.

3. Mediative Behaviour: The third category of mediation describes a wide variety of activity, most of which is not formally recognised as mediation. It includes the behaviour of ordinary citizens working effectively as third party interveners in

actual situations across society in marriages and families, neighbourhoods, community settings and the workplace. This respect the Media Network affirms that mediation practice which is relevant to our time.

We resist the tendency to present mediation as something that is imported from abroad. We firmly hope to have to the on-line, in-person and developing methodology which resonates with their inherent wisdom from the 21st century's bitter conflict.

However, it would be difficult to maintain what is already in place and properly acknowledge the true teaching of those Social Skills which have been so crucial to the development of mediation practice in the U.S.A., such as non-competitive, non-obligatory and non-legal.

Mediation Behaviour has three key concepts:

Firstly, 'A Sense of the Other' - imparting awareness of the other side with humility and respect.

Secondly, 'Inclusive Thinking' - enabling each side to think about the situation in ways which include the needs of the other side.

Thirdly, 'Truth Work' - Northern Ireland's society is often polarised with Catholics and Protestants adopting age-old positions and digging in' like soldiers. Mediators can work effectively by spending time in the various trenches as an impartially mediated by a neutral mediator.

Of course, there are dangers with this work. Each side is normally suspicious of outsiders and especially of those who are perceived as being in opposition. In this respect we need to work with both Catholic and Protestant and utilise their respective 'tribal' instincts to establish and maintain relationships with each other.

Practitioners.

The Mediation Network is the most developed
Northern Ireland with the most people

Firstly corporate session mediators like ourselves

Secondly network people who mediate mainly

Thirdly with people who have basic knowledge of the con-
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Language.

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group leaders were building workers. suggested that starting mediation process with terms for the final outcome was like a builder starting with the chimney. My point needed no further elucidation.

should like to make one last point about the language of mediation in N Ireland. The terminology such as Conflict Resolution, Intervention, Transformation Conflict Processes, Third Parties, can be quite abstract for many people. The language of mediation is comparatively new. It is, perhaps, a new way to describe old precepts. However, until mediation becomes more widely respected and becomes more credible in the life of our society its theories remain abstractions and aspirations. There is, therefore, a need for 'middle language' for mediators to speak the language of ordinary people but also to include some vision and creativity in their words.

The terms of mediation should blend Familiarity with Innovation
Neutrality.

would suggest that in Northern Ireland there are very few, if any truly neutral people. Certainly for those of us born in N Ireland, we are normally perceived to come from one or other side of the religious divide between Catholic and Protestant. I believe that mediators should not feel the need to deny their authenticity as a Catholic or Protestant but, rather, utilise their background in the practice of their trade. Indeed, one's perceived religious (or even ethnic) identity can be a bonus to the work. As a Catholic I have found Protestants to be anxious to make themselves understood by me, while Catholics can enjoy a sense of safety when speaking bluntly to someone from their own 'tribe' (The same applies to my Protestant colleague.

While we need not to feign neutrality we do however need to remain impartial in our work. As with any other profession, Impartiality is an important hallmark of a mediator

In my experience, I have found that retaining a mentality of Impartiality, of being 'open minded' in my work has often made me 'other centred' - with more awareness of what others believe and feel about a situation, rather than noticing my own beliefs and feelings. It has sometimes been the case that I have only begun to sense my own feelings when some time has elapsed after working in a conflictual situation. Only then can one feel safe to indulge in the comparative luxury of one's own attitudes and beliefs.

The Use of Outsiders

I should like to comment on the use of outsiders or foreigners as practitioners in the Northern Ireland conflict. Again, I would divide them into a number of categories.

Firstly, tourists - those who come to see and go on their merry way. Such people are not usually troublesome, though they can consume valuable time.

Secondly, fixers or missionaries - people who come to sort us out and solve our problems. Such people are met with polite hospitality rather than honest rejection and it can take such an individual some years to learn they are not being taken seriously.

Thirdly, pilgrims - people who come with a genuine sense of respect for our people and our conflict. These are most useful and have three vital functions:

1. To ask good questions.
2. To tell useful stories from elsewhere.
3. To learn from us in our complicated mess.

Clearly there is much to be gained from the cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences between people working in various conflictual situations across Europe and elsewhere. In this respect, I commend the work of REUNIR in their efforts to promote greater awareness among theorists and practitioners in our field.