

MEDIATION IN IRELAND  
The Impact of Small Beginnings

by Joan Broder

I am going to bring you up to date on the development of mediation services in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic to the South. Then I will outline how I see conflict resolution skills fitting in the political situation in Northern Ireland.

I was trained in Community Boards, San Francisco, in 1986 with two other people, Sr. Christina O'Neil and Geoffrey Corry. When we came back, we spent time "Irishizing" the process. It is important that the process be culturally sensitive. We feel comfortable now that we have a process that suits our needs.

We have trained people from community groups, people from statutory agencies, educationalists, and many others. We find it significant that some of the people from the police force in Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, have recently been trained in these skills. We expect others to follow.

We have family mediation services both in Dublin (Ireland) and in Belfast (Northern Ireland). Family Mediation Services of Dublin was established in 1986 and Belfast in 1987. The result was a growing interest in parent-child mediation in the Probation Board, which provides social services to the criminal justice system. 80% of the staff have been trained in mediation skills. They are now doing a lot of work in parent child mediation. We are establishing a mediation network to try to give more training and support to the probation officers.

#### Neighborhood Schemes

We also have one neighborhood dispute services, based outside Belfast. We originally had two, but one closed due

to resource problems. In these schemes we cannot get people to meet face to face. So we have been operating a shuttle mediation service. We are not sure why this has happened, and we need to do some evaluation of that. Some would say there is a cultural difference, but then when you look at parent child mediation within the probation board where you have little difficulty getting people face to face, I don't think it matches up.

Recently working parties have been established in Belfast and Dublin to look at establishing mediation centers. They are expected to report back in August.

One of the areas that our umbrella organization of mediation groups, Northern Ireland Conflict Mediation Association, NICMA, has been especially involved in is cross cultural or prejudice reduction work. Peter McLachlan who was at this conference in Denver, has been doing a lot of work in that area. We also had Cherie Brown of the National Coalition Building Institute over from the USA last year, to do a weekend workshop on prejudice reduction. Quite a few people now are working on trying to "Irishize it" and are using some of the skills and information gained from that workshop to work in schools.

#### Schools

Sr. Christina O'Neil has introduced mediation to Convent School in Dublin with significant results. The program is although not as formalized as you have in America. We don't have Conflict Managers running around the playground. We are currently asking the Department of Education for a full time worker to introduce this concept to schools in Northern Ireland. We have trained about 30 or 40 teachers from very different schools. We are hoping to build on that and in the next year get involved in at least 6 pilot schools.

Victim Offender mediation grew from a concern for the victims of crime. There was an understanding that they needed support and so victim court schemes were established in the community. Some of these have moved towards victim offender mediation. We now have 5 victim offender support schemes in Northern Ireland and we are hoping this year to expand.

### The Northern Irish Conflict

I would now summarize the movements over the last year in the overall Northern Irish conflict. Until recently both the Nationalists, who are supporters of an all Ireland state, and b Unionists, those supporting maintenance of links to Britain, felt that the solution for the Northern Irish problem lay with the British Government. However with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and recent pronouncements by the Secretary of State it has become clear that the British Government sees itself as powerless to affect a solution to the political conflict.

The government in the last six months has been listening closely and consulting with people in the community and have actually implemented some of their suggestions. So there is a feeling now that you have to look inside for some of the solutions. This is very hopeful.

Further, over the last year some of the most respected minds of the British military have admitted that a military victory is impossible, and the Irish Republican Army has admitted to definite limitations. Those are two very significant events. Meanwhile in the economic realm, the recession has hit the Protestant community. Some large employers are being faced with privatization.

The Protestant (Unionist) community sees this combination of events a separation order on them. They are fearful. It is a very unpredictable

time for them.

On the Nationalist side, within Sinn Fein, which is the political wing of the IRA, they used to see the war as between the IRA and the British government. Now they recognize that there are a million Protestants in the North of Ireland and that they do have to be taken into consideration. And that is quite a shift in perception.

Recently, word leaked out that some leaders from the various Nationalist and Unionist factions had held a series of secluded dialogues in Germany last year. Immediately after the news broke a poll was undertaken. It found that the majority of people favored these talks. It is the first time that people in Northern Ireland were in favor of the different parties dialoguing. That gave people a real sense of hope.

So all in all it is quite fluid at the moment and I think there are many seeds of hope there. Conflict resolution is yet another part of this.

### Conflict Resolution Benefits

In three main ways I see our conflict resolution work as having a direct impact:

First, is the Irish are learning that conflict can be positive and needs time. Living in a society where conflict is viewed as negative and to be avoided, this is a real mind shift for people. The training helps bring this about, so people can feel they can face conflict.

Second, you are actually giving people skills, so they feel more confident and more equipped to deal with the conflict. They can use these skills not only in their professional life but in their working life, and for their personal lives as well. The third area is the process itself.

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THE PITFALLS OF THE "HELPFUL MEDIATOR"  
IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

by D.K. Sampath

The tactic of mediators getting "actively involved as parties in the conflict situation to help resolve their dispute" has its own cost. We at Tirupour Mediation Centre, in South India, often find the problem thrown back on our lap by the parties saying, "We came here for your help. Do what you think best for us."

Such passive attitude emerges from the helplessness of the poor, a hallmark of the dependancy culture. It is true that the mediator wears more than one hat in a small well knit community. He acts as a well-wisher, peace maker, monitor, advisor and leader besides being a helpful intervener in the dispute. But, while playing these roles, caution is necessary to see that the party's role never degenerates into a passive onlooker's function. Particularly, in the matter of implementation of the consensus, we ensure for the disputants specific acts all along the way. We look on mediation as a self-help programme. Parties involvement is part of the learning process which mediation is.

One of the problems we grapple with is to restore the self-motivation lost during the foreign rule in some of the Asian countries. It suited the rulers to encourage the poor to look to them for everything, thereby promoting the ruler's indispensability. Even after the departure of the Imperial Power, the poor look to the Government for everything. Moreover, the helplessness is reinforced by fatalism, so characteristic of Asian societies.

Mediation, if it is to serve as a social tool, should shift the emphasis from fate control to behavior control. The social power emerging from a conflict situation is the ability one person has of influencing another's thoughts and acts. The objective of

mediation is to release this social power to defuse the conflict in inter-personal relationships.

To be passive is to abdicate this power. The poor cannot afford to do so. They have very few powers. The mediator has to restore that power where it belongs. The helping hand of the mediator is not unwelcome - so long as it does not come in the way of self help.

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Those who are trained in conflict resolution skills, begin to see that there is a definite process that you must go through before you reach a solution. We are a very solution oriented society. We also tend to concentrate on the negatives rather than the positives. The training makes people realize that you have to create the right environment before you can ever move on to solution.

I believe that in Northern Ireland we are just at the stage of creating the right environment and that conflict resolution is a strand in this process.

It is a time of hope, but it should not be overestimated. I do not see the violence as going away for another five or 10 years, but I do believe that in the end we will get there.

[Exerpted from Joan Broder's comments on a panel developed by the Conflict Resolution Center International at the North American Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution, 1989]

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