

## Consultation on Cross-Cultural Conflict

by Alice M. Price

"I was invigorated and refreshed by these meetings."

These words of Noel Santiago, Mennonite Board of Missions consultant, express the enthusiasm of many who participated in a recent MCS-sponsored consultation on cross-cultural conflict. Held in April in Los Angeles and co-sponsored by the Office of Church and Society of the United Church of Christ, the meeting called together forty-five racially and ethnically diverse church leaders and conflict resolution practitioners.

Early on the agenda was the topic of police brutality. Poignancy was added to these discussions by the Rodney King incident and by the presence of church leaders with their own firsthand experiences of abuse.

An afternoon session focused on responses to chronic inter-ethnic conflicts, such as tensions between African Americans and Korean merchants in many U.S. cities. Jan Jung-Min Sunoo, a federal mediator and president of the Los Angeles Human Relations Service, led a panel discussion and fielded questions concerning the role of mediation and conciliation in lessening these inter-cultural tensions. A key question during this discussion was "who is really the 'enemy'?" when racial and ethnic minorities turn on one another.

Many church leaders in the group questioned the appropriate role of mediation when racism and socio-economic power imbalances are present. John Powell, an advocate for the mentally ill in Michigan, raised this concern in a pointed way: "Are we trying to put a horseshoe on an elephant here? What we are really talking about is POWER. I hear you talking about resolving a particular problem for a particular person on a particular day. But as long as there is still a power imbalance around that table, this problem will only arise again."

Powell, a church leader with both Mennonite and UCC ties, emphasized, "Unless conflict resolution strategies address basic issues of power, we'll always be in the same place." A lively discussion ensued around justice issues, as well as strategies for working at cross-cultural relationships.

The final topic area for discussion was racism and cross-cultural tensions within our own church structures. A highlight of

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this time was exchanging across denominational lines both the deeply-felt pain of racism and misunderstanding, as well as seeds of hope, such as workable models for multicultural leadership.

At the conclusion of the consultation, denominational caucuses spent time in identifying possible areas of follow-up from the meetings. Four points were stressed in the MCC-constituent caucus: 1) appreciation for work already being done by various church agencies related to cross-cultural understanding; 2) increased awareness of services such as those of MCS within the racial and ethnic minority churches; 3) access for these churches to foundational skills training on conflict resolution; and 4) increased teaching of conflict resolution skills, including cross-cultural conflict skills, for dominant-culture church leaders.

Participants agreed that cultural appropriateness and adaptation of dominant-cultural models are significant concerns. However, MCS was encouraged by the church leaders present to move ahead with foundational skills training in culturally diverse communities, as well as to recruit a wide range of participants into its standard mediation seminars. From these involvements, the questions of cultural appropriateness and adaptation can then be addressed in dialogue with active partners who represent diverse communities. ●

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In the second stage, also lasting several months, victim and offender misattribution of blame, if any, is confronted and corrected in individual and/or group therapy. For example, if the victim blames herself or himself, the therapist counsels otherwise. Or if the offender refuses to accept responsibility for the sexual abuse, for example by blaming the victim or asserting temporary loss of control, the therapist confronts the misattribution. In closing this stage of treatment, the offender writes an "abuse biography" and a letter of apology, which may or may not be actually presented to the victim.

Finally, in the third stage, the therapist presents closure choices to the victim (or parents). These include no contact at all, minimal contact such as receipt of the letter of apology, and in some cases a face-to-face session. If the victim and offender meet, the victim chooses the setting and is encouraged to bring advocates. The offender reads the letter of apology to the victim, and answers questions. The primary goal of these interactions, according to Bera, is to empower and help heal victims while protecting their safety. A secondary goal is to increase the offender's sense of responsibility by forcing the offender to confront the human costs of the abuse.

[Victims' advocates] support Bera's model because of its clarity regarding attribution issues. Victim-offender contact occurs only after the offender accepts responsibility for the offense and the victim ceases self-blaming behaviors. This differs from the legal process which actually encourages misattribution by encouraging denial in the offender and, sometimes, self-blame in the victim. It also differs from mediation which, being forwardlooking, may tend to ignore the problem of attribution entirely.

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