

# **TEN YEARS OF TRANSFORMING CHURCH CONFLICT**

## ***A HISTORY OF THE BRIDGE BUILDERS PROGRAMME***

### **The early years and initial development of Bridge Builders**

**February 1994:** Three-day course held at the London Mennonite Centre (LMC) led by Ron Kraybill, who had been the founding Director of Mennonite Conciliation Service in the USA in 1978, and who served in South Africa doing training and mediation work from 1990 to 1995. Alastair McKay attended this course and felt called to this field of service.

**February 1995:** After a year of frequent meetings with an interested group of participants from Ron Kraybill's course, a voluntary community mediation service was launched for the London Borough of Haringey, where the LMC is located. With four volunteer mediators on board, a new phone line was installed with an answering machine and a simple leaflet was created and distributed describing the available services.

**June 1995:** Alastair McKay submitted proposal to the Trustees of the London Mennonite Centre about the possibility of establishing Bridge Builders as a service of the Mennonite Centre. An excerpt from the proposal:

“Nelson Kraybill has begun to develop a training seminar in skills for handling church conflict. Already there is a demand from individual churches for this kind of training. A Cross-Currents seminar is being developed from Nelson's materials with input from Peter Wallich (another of the Bridge Builders' volunteers) and myself. This will run on 29 July 1995.

Having spoken with Ron Kraybill, former director of Mennonite Conciliation Service in the USA, now working in South Africa, and also to Juan-Jose Romero in Brussels, who heads up the mediation work at the Mennonite Centre there, I am convinced that there is a significant need and demand within churches for training in handling conflict; and, to a much more limited extent, a demand for mediating such conflicts.

Whilst many of the general skills for handling conflict will be relevant, church conflict is a specialist area of conflict which seems to have been little explored in this country. The available resources are very limited. This is an area into which the LMC could expand and devote greater resources. The LMC Council and Trustees need to decide therefore whether the LMC should seek to do so.”

**November 1995:** The community mediation service was closed as volunteer mediators were over-committed and the service was not viable on this basis. Nelson Kraybill, then Director of the LMC, with Alastair McKay maintained a real desire to serve British churches in transforming conflict within the life of the church. The name “Bridge Builders”, which came to Alastair during a sleepless night, was carried on to the next incarnation after the community mediation service closed.

**January 1996:** Mennonite Central Committee gave the London Mennonite Centre a grant to launch Bridge Builders with Nelson Kraybill and Alastair McKay both working one day a week.

**July 1996:** After having run several day-long workshops, Bridge Builders invited Richard Blackburn of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Centre to lead the first week-long mediation skills course at the London Mennonite Centre.

**1996 – 1999:** Nelson Kraybill returned to the US at the end of 1996 to serve as President of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, in Indiana, USA; and in August of 1997 Alastair McKay went to Eastern Mennonite University, in Virginia, USA, to study for an MA in Conflict Transformation. Mary Thiessen Nation and Andrew Lewis-Smith continued the work of Bridge Builders during this period.

**1999:** As part of a six-month internship, Alastair worked alongside Richard Blackburn and Bob Williamson at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Centre, in the Chicago suburbs. Bridge Builders has continued to work in partnership with Richard Blackburn and the LMPC to this day.

### **Expansion in 1999 and the first Development Plan**

**September 1999:** With an initial one-year contract offer from the LMC Trustees, Alastair McKay began work as the new full-time Director of Bridge Builders.

**1999-2000:** A Council of Reference was formed to endorse the work of Bridge Builders, and an Advisory Group to provide support and accountability. A Development Plan was created, with the assistance of a fundraising consultant, Richard Molineux, setting out the vision for Bridge Builders. An excerpt from the 15-page Development Plan, explaining the need for transforming conflict in the church and targets for Bridge Builders to achieve by 2004, follows:

“Our experience shows that there is a need among British churches for a new educational enterprise and for new structural frameworks to empower Christians to handle their conflicts in useful and positive ways, avoiding much of the destructiveness currently experienced. Overall, there is a need to foster a new culture of peacemaking within the church.

We believe that our Mennonite tradition within the Christian church, and our Mennonite experience of peacemaking in both the church and the world, provide an ideal base from which to seek to transform the British churches’ culture of handling conflict. Currently churches generally view conflict as negative. However, positive handling of conflict within the church can be seen as a central task of its calling: a source of energy and hope, and at the heart of discerning God’s will for reconciliation with and in the world.

This was an important document for Bridge Builders, articulating its vision, and also setting some challenging targets to achieve by the end of 2004, including the following:

- to train 250 church leaders in mediation skills, and to offer at least 10 follow-up training days for them;
- to develop a standard 2- or 3-day introductory course on transforming church conflict;
- to produce a 50-page training manual for use in church settings;
- to introduce over 1,000 church leaders and members to new ways of thinking about and dealing with church conflict, through our courses; and
- to conduct 5-10 mediation cases.

**2000-2005:** Mennonite trainers from North America were brought over to co-lead training courses: Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, then Director of Mennonite Conciliation Service; David Brubaker, then part of a training and peacemaking consortium in Arizona; and Kirsten Zerger, part of the faculty of the Kansas Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution.

**January 2004:** Despite Bridge Builders’ ongoing success, adequate sponsorship was not found to finance a full-time colleague to join Alastair. With the longstanding tradition of voluntary service among North American Mennonites, a volunteer colleague was sought and found in Charletta Erb who had completed a BA in Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies from Goshen College in 2003.

**October 2005:** Colin Patterson, an Anglican priest and training officer, joined the Bridge Builders staff, as Assistant Director, as demand for services continued to grow. At the same time, Alastair began studies for a Doctorate of Ministry degree, and moved to a four-day week with Bridge Builders.

**July 2006:** After two and a-half years of service, Charletta Erb finished her term with Bridge Builders and returned to the USA (where she married Tim Nafziger, who has also served at the LMC). She subsequently accepted a position with the Lombard Mennonite Peace Centre working alongside Richard Blackburn. Sharon Kniss, a recent graduate of Eastern Mennonite University's Justice, Peace and Conflict Studies Program, replaced Charletta as the North American Mennonite volunteer on Bridge Builders' staff.

### **Looking to the future**

A new Strategic Plan for Bridge Builders is being drafted, which includes the following brief statements of Bridge Builders' vision and mission:

Bridge Builders' vision is of local churches and their leaders throughout Great Britain functioning internally in healthy ways with a Biblically-grounded culture of peacemaking, and reaching out to offer this life to the world.

Bridge Builders' mission, as a service of the London Mennonite Centre, is to train and educate Christian leaders and church members in Great Britain and to offer consultancy, coaching and mediation services to them, in order to facilitate healthy group functioning and to develop a culture of peacemaking in the church so that this can be authentically offered in hope to the world.