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Bridge Builders

Transforming church conflict
A programme of the
London Mennonite Centre

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PRESS RELEASE

Church Mediation: Can the Church Deal Better with its Conflicts?

Church conflicts keep hitting the headlines, in both the mainstream media, and the church press. Can the Church find better ways to deal with conflicts in its midst? What hope does mediation offer the Church for addressing conflict?

The Mennonite service, **Bridge Builders**, is hosting a first national conference on Church Mediation on 19 September 2007 to address these questions. How are the mainstream English churches integrating mediation into their processes for working with conflict in the Church? After 11 years of training church leaders in mediation and facilitation skills, Bridge Builders is hosting this gathering with speakers from several English denominations, including the Baptist Church, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Salvation Army, and the United Reformed Church. Senior leaders from each denomination will reflect on how mediation is currently being used in their denominations. They will also consider the challenges facing the Church, and what their vision is for the future.

"Even the healthiest churches have to cope with substantial disagreements within them," asserts the **Revd Paul Hills**, a Baptist Senior Regional Minister. He continues, "My work calls on me to help churches deal with disagreement and potentially destructive conflict. I see a clear need for British churches to be educated about how to agree and disagree in love. This should include being ready to use external mediation services where this is necessary."

Other senior leaders are supportive of using mediation in the Church. "I am committed to the concept of mediation as a way of dealing with conflict situations in the Church," affirms **Revd Will Morrey**, Past President of The Methodist Conference and South Wales District Chair. He continues by explaining, "From experience at many levels of life in the Methodist Church, I know the problems that can arise when people feel forced to use an adversarial system. A process, like mediation, that offers the opportunity to deal properly with differences between people without forcing somebody into the loser role, has to be a better way in many cases."

The way we address conflict in the Church is significant. "How Churches resolve their disputes is important, both to the parties involved and to the Christian gospel," claims **Dr James Behrens**, chancellor of two Church of England dioceses, and author of *Church Disputes Mediation*. As a lawyer he affirms, "My experience of mediation convinces me that it provides a better way of resolving most church disputes than using some formal legal process." (continues)

Director
Alastair McKay

Council of Reference
Marigold Bentley
Viscountess Brentford OBE
Revd Elizabeth Caswell
Andrew Clark
Revd David Gamble
Rt Revd & Rt Hon David Hope
John Paul Lederach
Revd Will Morrey
Rt Revd Peter Price
Revd Ernie Whalley
Rt Revd Frank White
Lilamani Wickramaratne
Revd Dr Nigel Wright

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However, mediators working in a church context need an understanding of the culture and context in which they are working, as **Revd Elizabeth Caswell**, current Moderator of the United Reformed Church's General Assembly affirms: "In the URC I have from time to time encountered disputes which could benefit from the use of mediation. I therefore see a need for churches to draw on trained mediators with a Christian spiritual base to their work."

Director of Bridge Builders, **Alastair McKay**, sets the scene for the conference: "I believe that the Church can make a transformative difference in our society. We need better ways to deal with the conflicts facing us in Britain – and a Church which is faithful to Jesus will model the healthy handling of conflict. Sadly the current reality is often different. If we have anything to offer the world, then we have to be living out the gospel in our own midst. How we engage with one another around our conflicts, and how we work at reconciliation and conflict transformation, is a key dimension of living out the Christian gospel in today's world."

The Church Mediation conference is being held at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine's in the East End of London on Wednesday 19 September 2007, from 9:45 am until 6:00pm with the option of an evening meal. The cost is £60. A brochure and application form can be downloaded from www.menno.org.uk

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Bridge Builders runs a church mediation service and provides training courses in handling conflict for church leaders. Launched in January 1996, Bridge Builders is a service of the London Mennonite Centre, a service organisation to the British churches, and a registered charity, founded in 1953. The LMC is staffed by a mixture of British staff, and North American missionaries and volunteers.
2. The Mennonite Church, which originated in the early 16th century in mainland Western Europe during the period known as the Reformation, is an international Christian denomination of around 1 million people, with a historic commitment to non-violence and peacemaking.
3. **For further information, contact Alastair McKay on 020-8340 8775 or 07740-944214.**

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