

## Mediators' Network Newsletter

### 15 March 2004

This year, Bridge Builders is introducing a quarterly Mediators' Network email newsletter. We will highlight mediation issues, programme updates, book reviews, and opportunities. Upcoming issues may address topics such as: Mediator Neutrality, Transformative Mediation, Assertiveness, and Listening Skills. Please let us know if there are issues that you would like us to address. And also let us know if you have an article or book review that you might be able to contribute. It is our hope that this service will be a useful point of connection for the Mediators' Network, and a way of exploring issues faced in practicing mediation.

#### ***In this issue ...***

*Programme Updates - Welcoming Charletta Erb, Bridge Builders Assistant*

*Mediation UK Southern Conference - Opening Plenary Session discussing family mediation, community mediation, anti-social behaviour and restorative justice*

*Christians and Anger – Reflections on a recent seminar offered at the London Mennonite Centre considering how anger can be used for good*

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#### ***Programme Updates***

##### **Welcoming Charletta Erb to Bridge Builders**

Alastair McKay is delighted to finally have a colleague working with him. Charletta Erb is a Mennonite volunteer from the United States who joined the London Mennonite Centre as Bridge Builders Assistant in early January.

In December 2003, Charletta graduated from a Mennonite liberal arts school, [Goshen College](#), with a bachelor's degree in [Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies](#). She chose to focus on Conflict Studies with the vision of becoming a mediator. Under the direction of Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, she studied mediation skills, and organisational conflict through Carolyn's emphasis on practical experience.

This knowledge was reemphasised through Charletta's service as teacher's assistant for Carolyn, as she helped other students practice mediation skills through role play scenarios. Conflict Studies also included an organisational assessment for a local non-profit organisation, as well as a co-mediation in a parent-teen conflict. Charletta also served on the Indiana-Michigan Conference Justice, Peace and Service Commission where she was inspired to form a Conflict Transformation Ministry Team, which provided Conflict Skills training workshops to congregations in the conference.

As Bridge Builders Assistant, Charletta continues to develop her skills in working with conflict through assistance with correspondence, training and mediation sessions, as well as development of training tools.

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##### ***Mediation UK - Southern Conference***

##### **Opening Plenary: Civil Renewal, Community Cohesion, Anti-Social Behaviour and Community Justice too!**

Mediation UK Conference participants gathered in Brighton on the 18-19<sup>th</sup> of February, naming the issues faced as mediation shifts society from adversarial ways. The first conference plenary focused on family mediation, community mediation, anti-social behaviour and restorative justice, showing the need for integration in various programmes. As entrepreneurs, mediation practitioners do revolutionary work, and face an uphill climb to administer programs that offer something new to society. Community

mediation programmes bring together tense neighbours to talk when communication might otherwise shut down, yet they often rely on volunteers through lack of funds. Practitioners operating in the Restorative Justice field offer models of collaborative negotiations rather than the adversarial justice system, yet they can struggle with the bureaucracy of the system already established. The work of mediators in the UK is highly significant, yet programmes face unique challenges and growing possibilities as described by plenary speakers, some of whose comments are summarised below.

### *Family mediation programmes*

Family Mediation can contribute to other programmes related to justice. For example, consider the role of families in anti-social behaviour and crime prevention. Programmes addressing these issues in an integrated way could mean societal leaps in addressing crime and rehabilitation. Yet these integrated practices will require much more resources and collaboration. A spokesperson for the UK College of Family Mediators recognised that programmes are often small and unstable, suggesting that programmes should unify to become more viable and coherent.

### *Community-based programmes*

Community mediation can create real potential for people to get involved in their communities. Civic renewal projects usher in a culture shift, getting citizens more involved in localised decision-making, dealing directly with their own problems. Such efforts require new ways of citizen-government relating, with the state giving more power to locals. Community cohesion, or bringing people together, is complicated in the face of intercultural differences and communication styles. Mediators must work hard to build trust and confidence in communities.

### *Anti-Social Behaviour Cases*

Some mediation programmes are receiving referrals from cases of anti-social behaviour. A spokesperson for a community cohesion programme questioned whether such cases are merely problems to solve, or if they are symptoms of systemic problems. Mediation principles suggest that we look at systemic problems in a more concerted way. Unfortunately, the government has recognised the benefits of mediation in crime prevention, but not at all stages of intervention. Having just launched TOGETHER, an initiative for addressing anti-social behaviour, the government has failed to recognise that mediation programmes offer better success rates than other measures adopted by the campaign.

### *Restorative Justice*

While government initiatives for addressing anti-social behaviour are discouraging to the mediation field, governmental Restorative Justice and Criminal Justice developments are full of potential for integrating with the mediation field. If mediation programmes can quickly demonstrate effectiveness, allocation of funding will increase. This would require rapid growth of mediation, recruiting more volunteers and paid staff. To learn more about the government's strategy: <http://www.restorativejustice.org.uk/about-rj/adult.htm>.

Mediation offers great potential for transforming communities and justice. With increased awareness of ways of integrating programmes, and with the demonstration of the success of mediation, we can access resources that will strengthen mediation programmes' capacity to respond to community needs. Then we can see construction of better relationships between the government and citizens, the see restoration of offenders and victims, and the improved communication between parties in conflict.

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### ***Christians and Anger***

When we think of anger, we may picture the icy stance of ignoring others, or we might think of a fire of rage burning inside. These painful images are not easy to face, neither are the conflicts that we associate with anger. Anger is very much a part of conflict. If conflict means differences of perspective plus tension, anger is near to the heart of the tension we face in conflict. Anger may be a symptom that

we are in conflict, but it can also be a cause of aggravation of conflict and a shutdown in communication. Conflict can be used for good or bad, and so can anger - it can make us aware and spur us on to action.

Anger is the instinct to protect oneself when we feel threatened, to move into action when some injustice occurs. It is the rage that rises when we feel we have been wronged, when something we value is threatened, or when someone we love is hurt. And sometimes, it comes in the frustration we feel when we have disappointed ourselves.

Andrew Lester provides an interesting definition of anger in his book, The Angry Christian. "Anger is the physical, mental, and emotional arousal pattern that occurs in response to a personal threat to the self characterised by the desire to attack or defend" (p4). The immediate objection to this definition is that it does not seem to address those times when we are afraid for someone else, or when we perceive some injustice and feel a righteous anger on someone else's behalf.

Vic Thiessen has wrestled with the issue of anger, and recently led a seminar at the London Mennonite Centre. He offered an uplifting understanding of the anger that we face as Christians. Thiessen says that anger "can be a debilitating and dangerous thing, but it can also provide the energy and passion to work for justice and peace with our hearts and not just our minds." It can be constructively "channelled into a conversation on why each person feels angry ... Anger can give us the energy to be truthful with each other, which is hard work, but it needs to be transformed into a loving truthfulness." Thiessen says that we should deal with anger by directing it at issues, *not* at people.

What does the Bible teach us about anger? We can draw on scriptures and get a sense of God's will for us in the midst of our experiences of anger. Scriptures show us that anger is normal, not a sin in and of itself, but as Thiessen says, "It only becomes a sin when it is mishandled." Jesus got angry in the temple since it was made into a marketplace, a den of thievery in the name of religion. Stories of God in the Old Testament portray an angry God – passionate for people, frustrated in the desire to have God's will accomplished. Ephesians and James provide Christians with instructions for coping with anger.

*Ephesians 4.26-27, 31-32*

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with malice, and be kind to one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

*James 1.19-20*

You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness

These can seem like mixed messages, as we are permitted to be angry, yet we are called to be slow to anger. Anger is natural, but we should not be ruled by it, nor ignore it. To "put away" anger does not mean we are supposed to suppress anger, rather it is like removing the pot from a fire when it is about to boil over - don't put a lid on it! Thiessen concludes that "We are actually called to be angry ... but we are supposed to deal with that anger appropriately and not make room for the devil." In our anger we are just experiencing what it is to be human – anger is permissible - but we must do something beneficial with it and not be ruled by it.

Vic Thiessen suggests that we look to the example of Jesus, facing great injustice on the cross. As Christians, we should "take our anger to the cross to be crucified and transformed." Rather than use anger for harm, we should be "willing to suffer ... and yet forgive those who have wronged us while using our anger to challenge the injustice around us." In this way, our anger can be embraced as part of being created in God's image, a passion to be transformed for good rather than violence.

***Recommended Reading***

The Angry Christian by Andrew D. Lester, Westminster John Knox Press 2003

Available from our own Metanoia Book Service, through Will Newcomb: [menno@compuserve.com](mailto:menno@compuserve.com)

