



Bridge Builders' Network Newsletter

June 2008

"Getting People to the Table"

In our mediation skills course, we emphasise that the work of "getting people to the table" or "pre-mediation" is just as important as the mediation session itself. I knew intellectually this was the case, but am struck through experience how true this continually rings for us at Bridge Builders. I'm discovering that although for a church to make an enquiry into mediation feels like a big step, actually following through with the enquiry and entering into the process is truly the bigger step.

Mediation is not always the most appropriate approach for dealing with conflict. Sometimes after church leaders' first contact with us, they return to their leadership team or congregation and realise that mediation is not the direction they'd like to go. Unfortunately, many times we as mediators truly believe that mediation is indeed the best step forward, but can only go so far in encouraging the persons in conflict to see it as worth trying.

Sometimes we're left with the disappointment of knowing the possibilities, and seeing them left unchosen or indeed rejected. In a recent case I was working on, we spent nearly six weeks of pre-mediation work only to discover at the end of the time that the parties were no longer willing to move towards mediation at this time.

As I now move on to another case, and again work at "getting people to the table", I'm reminded from my recent experience that I need to be constantly seeking God's leading and asking for God to be actively at work within all persons involved, working within our hearts and minds as we all seek

together for reconciliation. It is clear to me that the pre-mediation stages deserve as much, if not more, preparation by God within each person (including the mediators), as within the actual mediation / intervention process. I therefore conclude with a prayer for reconciliation and a quote which has been helpful for me.

A prayer for reconciliation:

All powerful and ever-living God,
we praise and thank you for your presence and
action in the world.

In the midst of conflict and division, we know it is
you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace.

Your Spirit changes our hearts:
enemies begin to speak to one another,
those who were estranged join hands in friendship,
and nations seek the way of peace together.

Your Spirit is at work
when understanding puts an end to strife,
when hatred is quenched by mercy,
and vengeance gives way to forgiveness.

For this we should never cease to thank you.
Holy, holy, holy are you, Lord.

*"We don't transform ourselves, but when we
finally hear, the Spirit has access to our hearts
and that is what changes us."*

--Anne Lamott

-Sharon Kniss

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NOTE FOR NEW MEMBERS

As a member of our Network, you receive our quarterly Bridge Builders' Network newsletter by email. This seeks to highlight programme updates, book reviews, opportunities to develop your skills and wider mediation issues. We hope that the newsletter is a helpful supplement to Bridge Builders' Network Days, and a way of exploring issues around conflict in the church. Please give us feedback on what is useful to

you or what you would like to read about. If you are interested in receiving previous issues of this email newsletter, reply to this email with your request.

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FROM THE NETWORK



"Trust the process, it does work!"

I think this phrase has become my new mantra and is as important to me as my other older mantra: 'God loves you, it'll be ok!'

I was a beginner when I attended the Bridge Builders course on Skills Training for Mediation and Facilitation in the Church at Ushaw College, Durham in October of 2007. I had a lot of experience of being in conflict situations (individual and group) that had not been handled well and I was now very keen and ready to learn skills, techniques and processes that would help.

After the week's training I had become convinced and converted to the truth that a good process, if applied well, can make a huge difference to the outcome of conflict situations and I was eager to try out my newly learnt skills on a real live situation, (preferably with a co-facilitator who was very experienced and could cover my inevitable mistakes!).

I got a chance to test out this truth a week later when a potential conflict situation emerged at work. With my heart in my mouth, I proposed a process of dealing with this conflict to the team involved and offered to facilitate it (on my own – a desperate situation!). I described a group process to the team, that involved active, reflective listening of each person in the group with the use of the 'talking stick', a meeting to air and define the problem and identify common concerns and needs, culminating in another meeting that considered a range of actions to move the issues forward. I put a time scale on it, clearly set out objectives, ground rules and a decision rule and waited with held breath for the reaction.

That first plunge into the deep end was a great learning experience for me. The team were puzzled, intrigued and slightly sceptical that we needed a formal structured process and I had to convince some of them that 'just talking about things' was not going to be as productive or as effective as they thought in handling communication during a time of conflict. In the end, I think they all agreed to participate in the process more out of a desire to give me a chance to practice my newly learnt skills! I stuck to the process doggedly and made sure they spoke only when holding the 'talking stick'; that reflecting back was done well and that each person felt their point of view had been heard and understood by everyone else; that they brainstormed solutions without evaluating them to begin with and so on ... I was probably over zealous in my attention to all the detail. However, the end to this story is a very happy one indeed. Not only was a potentially difficult conflict resolved well, but one of the most sceptical of the team members fed back that this had been the best process of group communication in a conflict he had ever been part of. What did I tell you? Trust the process, it works!

Since that time I have successfully completed victim-offender mediation training with Remedi in Sheffield and been a co-mediator in a case where 3 different languages were in use between the parties involved. That experience requires another article! My enthusiasm for mediation is growing which sounds perverse but is probably similar to a surgeon who can't wait to get their hands on some very complicated surgery that usually means some poor person is very sick and suffering!

--Aglia Barraclough, Sheffield

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



The Joy of Teaching

Daria White, who completed the Bridge Builders' skills training course in October 2005, shares the experience of teaching her first class in basic Psychology for the extension programme at United Theological Faculty, Bulgaria.

I had a class of 18 very different people from all over Bulgaria. On Day 1, we met, talked, and discussed basic theory. Everything seemed fine, but on Day 2 the mood changed. We started by discussing our meeting time for the following day, Saturday. Someone got up and told me in a very irritated tone, "Your class almost didn't happen because we did not agree to study on Saturday". People started raising their voices, the atmosphere became very tense, and I was wondering what I was doing there. I could have replied, "I am the teacher and I say we meet tomorrow" ... but I would have lost half the group. So I said, "I have a suggestion. I was going to talk about this tomorrow as theory but do you want to find out now how we could solve this problem and be able to treat each other as brothers and sisters?" There was half-hearted agreement. I felt the temperature in the room rising, but carried on.

Step by step, we went through the process of finding the shared values of the group and what everyone's interests were, and took time to hear out each person. Slowly the mood changed. We were now able to brainstorm and come to some conclusions. With a unanimous vote we decided to meet at 8 a.m. the next day - very early for all of us, as Sofia is a big city and we were all tired. As the day finished, we talked about the Living Water - where we seek life and how we try finding water apart from God. We prayed. The group had become a different group.

That evening I had to look through 18 homeworks on "How has my childhood affected my ministry and relationships now?" The revelation for me was heart-stopping - Bulgarians were just people who have nowhere to talk about their hurts and problems. I ended up staying at my desk until 1 o'clock, trying to write comments back and giving the only counselling advice most people would get here.

Next day we started at 8 a.m. Everyone was there, except for one who had been in a bad car accident the previous day. The conflict resolution had worked!! I made a circle and attempted to do the first therapy group. I hoped that I was not in for a major disappointment. Had anyone ever done this here before? I had no idea what to expect.

I had seen a theme running through many of their papers - an absent, distant, harsh father for the men present. So I asked, "Does anyone want to share something about their childhood and the way their Dad was?" One did. He talked about a father who never approved of him, and made him believe in a God who always had to be pleased. Next Ivan, the youngest in the group, shared with shaking voice what it was like to never feel love from Dad, who finally abandoned the family when he was 12. The oldest man, Rumen, started explaining in detail what he knew about Ivan. I turned and said, "We do not talk in the third person about someone present. Turn to Ivan directly and tell him in a sentence what it was like to hear what he just said." So Rumen turned and said, "Ivan, I have always had a fatherly concern for you".

Then a very outspoken woman said, "You should have been grateful, Ivan! God put this person in your life for your good (talking about his father)." All of a sudden everyone was telling him to forgive and ask for God's love. I had to cut the conversation and say, "Look, we are not here to give advice, analyze and judge. We want to stay with Ivan in this hurt he is sharing with the group." Another man shared how abusive his father was and that lately he had forgiven him for the past. I pointed out that it had taken him 30 years to forgive and that we cannot tell people when they are ready. God is the one preparing the heart and doing the healing. Time, and a community of people, is what we can provide for the hurting soul. It went on for some time: people talking, men sharing with each other. It was astounding - at one point we were all sitting there, eyes wide open not believing that we could share in this way. I said, "You see, guys, this is what the church could be like. We are just getting a taste of it now."

Then we prayed - just the men. This was a safe place for them to say what was on their hearts. It was a true blessing to hear them speak to God about their hurt and their desire to love better, be closer to others, and know God for who He is - a true Father who loves His children and wants to bring healing and peace within.

We ended, and Rumen said how much he loved us all and wanted to give us a hug - so there was a time for hugs and then for food. As we are not that expressive - especially our men - it was very touching. A woman was crying: I went to ask what was going on. She was older. She said, "I realise the damage I have done to my kids with all the rigid rules I had in the house. I am thankful that they got to know God, but I have made many mistakes."

Someone came and asked me: "How did you do this? I have never felt such closeness with other

Christians." I felt that I had no answer. I had helped the atmosphere of peace be there. Could I repeat it? I have no idea...

So, this has been a major breakthrough for me. That group was a taste of heaven. I feel that this is what I want to see more of: people truly connecting - first with themselves - becoming more in tune with what God provides in their lives, and then moving powerfully in the lives of others.

I am so thankful to my teachers at Philadelphia Biblical University as I sat in such groups 10 years ago, with no idea how it could be done in Bulgaria. It turns out it is possible. We all are thirsty people. But until we realize that we thirst like the deer panting for cool water, we will not search for it.

EVALUATING BRIDGE BUILDERS



EVALUATING BRIDGE BUILDERS: A Collaborative Research Project

What difference has training with Bridge Builders made for you? How has being part of the Bridge Builders' Network been helpful to you? In what ways can Bridge Builders training be improved? And what is not being adequately addressed in the training that Bridge Builders offers?

These are the type of questions that we are looking to address through an in-depth evaluation that will form the centre of Alastair McKay's Doctorate of Ministry research. Bridge Builders has been running for over 12 years. We have always sought feedback on our courses. Now we want to take a broader and longer term view of our effectiveness. And we need your help to make this possible.

In the late autumn of 2008 we plan to send out a questionnaire to everyone who has attended one of our week-long mediation and facilitation skills

courses. Then in the first half of 2009, we will be running four interactive workshops, entitled *Evaluating Bridge Builders*. These will be held in **Durham** on 14 or 15 January, in **London** at the LMC on 22 January, probably in **London** again on 23 April (or possibly in **Manchester** - let us know if this would appeal to you), and in **Leeds** on 30 April. We warmly invite you to attend one of them.

We anticipate that the workshops will provide an opportunity to learn new things about yourself and about others, as well as offering valuable feedback to improve the work that Bridge Builders does in serving the Church in Britain, and its leaders. We hope that the workshops will also help you to begin shaping a personal development plan of areas in which you might grow in your handling of conflict.

More information will follow in due course. Please contact Alastair if you want to know more before then: alastair.mckay@menno.org.uk

NEW COURSE STRUCTURE FOR BRIDGE BUILDERS

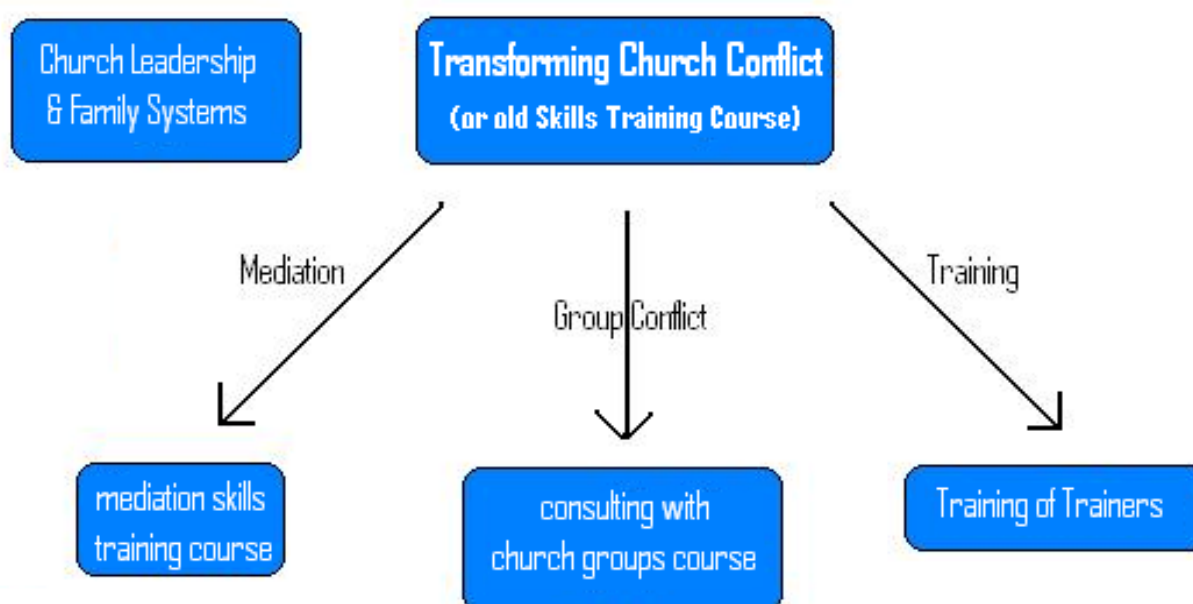


As was mentioned in the last newsletter, the Bridge Builders' team has discerned the need for a slight shift in our course offerings. Our prayers and discussions have led us to create a new basic week-long course, *"Transforming Church Conflict: A Foundation Course for Leaders"*. We have discovered in conversations with you that the most transformative aspect of the current week-long course is engaging with new ideas of conflict – our perspective and understanding of it as well as our response to it. We want to provide more opportunity to delve into this significant shift towards viewing conflict as a potentially healthy aspect of daily life; a normal growth catalyst. We have also sensed the need for more opportunities in facilitation training and experience. We hope that these foci alongside old favourites of communication skills and "divided and bound together by conflict" and new foci on leadership, difficult situations, and reflective elements will form an exciting foundation for Christian leaders who want to contribute positively to the lives of others and to the health and vitality of their congregations and work places. We are well

into the planning of this course and are delighted that the first run of it in October is fully booked!

Transforming Church Conflict will become the primary prerequisite for further training with Bridge Builders. We will continue to offer mediation skills training each year, but beginning in 2009, we will run a specific course on mediation with more time devoted to practice and assimilating the process. Those wishing to attend our Training of Trainers course (offered once/year) and group consultancy course (offered every other year) will have had to complete our foundation course first. Those having completed the earlier version of the Skills Training for Mediation and Facilitation will be able to count the course as equal to the new foundation course, serving as a prerequisite for further training. We currently plan on continuing to run Richard Blackburn's Church Leadership & Family Systems course each year, with no prerequisite.

The new structure can be visualised as follows:



PROGRAMME UPDATES



Bridge Builders' Network Days 2008

For the remainder of 2008, the mediation skills refresher days are on **25 September in Scotland (Inverkeithing)**, and **2 October in Coventry**. If you are looking to review your skills, please book on to one of these.

Other days in the autumn will be looking at group conflict situations, and facilitating meetings. On **17/18 September in Durham and London** we will be looking at assessing and determining appropriate intervention for *group conflict situations*, using case studies provided by those in attendance. On **25 September in Reading** we will look at *facilitating healthy meetings* through review of skills learnt and active practice.

If you would like to join us for any of the forthcoming dates, please post payment along with notice of the day you wish to attend, to Bridge Builders, 14 Shepherds Hill, LONDON N6 5AQ. You can also email Phyllis at phyllis.shirk@menno.org.uk, but we will not process your booking until payment is received via post. All days are £20 for current Network Members, including lunch.

We will be announcing our 2009 Network Days in our September Network Newsletter.

AUTUMN 08

17 September 2008 in Durham at St Nicholas' Church, *Group Conflict Casework*

18 September 2008 at the London Mennonite Centre, *Group Conflict Casework*

25 September 2008 in Reading at Abbey Baptist Church, *Facilitating Meetings*

25 September 2008 in Inverkeithing, Scotland at Inverkeithing Baptist Church, *Mediation Skills Practice*

2 October 2008 in Coventry at Queen's Road Baptist Church, *Mediation Skills Practice*

Bridge Builders' Diary: Forthcoming Training Courses

Please see our website www.menno.org.uk for full brochures and application forms.

Skills Training for Mediation & Facilitation in the Church [FULLY BOOKED]
29 June – 4 July 2008, Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, Scotland

Transforming Church Conflict: A Foundation Course for Leaders [NB: Limited Space]
19 – 24 October 2008, Whirlow Grange Conference Centre, Sheffield

Training of Trainers
18 – 20 November 2008, London Mennonite Centre

Transforming Church Conflict: A Foundation Course for Leaders
8 – 13 February 2009, Guy Chester Centre, Muswell Hill, London

RESOURCES



- **Metanoia Book Service Online:** <http://www.metanoiabooks.org.uk/> or in person: Will Newcomb, at the London Mennonite Centre (0208 340 8775 / 0845 4500 214)
 - **Coming up in our September Newsletter:** Survey of UK Conflict Organisations
 - **Google Group:** If you have not yet joined, or if you have any concerns or problems related to signing up to the group, please email Sharon at bb@menno.org.uk.
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Grace and Peace to you from the Bridge Builders team: Alastair, Colin, and Sharon