

# Conflict transformation- Process and Practice

A report of the Social Responsibility Network Conference June 2005 located in Belfast

## Synopsis

**There is no holiness without social holiness' LINC project**

## Introduction

This paper sets out to introduce the reader to the key learning that emerged from the conference. The resolution of confrontation demands negotiated agreements between confronting parties, be those individuals, groups, communities or nations. The conference explored conflict situations as transforming opportunities, not just solutions to immediate or local problems. Delegates were able to study the impact of conflict transformation through the experience of living in and exploring Belfast with its people. Experienced academic, theological and sociological practitioners contributed papers identifying the incarnational nature of transformation. This theory was lived out through study visits to local projects. The papers are offered in the appendix to this document. Learning from the visits is used to illustrate the points made.

## Nature of conflict

Conflict is the natural response to threat, fear or hurt, the victim only defending themselves physically or defending what they believe in

The Shankhill community project seeks to find a multi-disciplinary solution that includes the paramilitaries and brings the offender back into the heart of the community

A fundamental need within our human well being is to have a clear sense of our identity and belonging. To secure these we compete for space within communities and a place as part of communities. When that is threatened or removed the natural response is to blame 'them'.

Peace is about a personal and rational need to resolve conflict. Peace is a process not an event. You have to sit down with your enemies. *From the panel discussion*

In particular turbulent situations, the need to survive creates a fundamentalism which is unjustified, but becomes an essential part of belonging and identity.

Such conflicting situations are fuelled by trusted sources, such as the church, politics, history and culture, all of which contribute to our understanding of who we are and where we belong. Conflict is perpetuated by structures that we rely on to support and inform our culture and context, but which also turn the interpretation of our history into bad myth.

## Nature of the Belfast context

The history of Belfast has been created by those who are both victims and architects of conflict.

The project is helping to educate people about their own history and identity, so that they can begin to understand the identity of others. They are seeking to inform the Loyalist Community about their background and heritage and also the Nationalist Community about why things and events have happened. Fernhill House

It is a story born out of controversy and continues to be played out by the current generations. For example, migrant workers have become oppressed by those who were the oppressed. In certain places only tourists wait for buses, locals know they will be victims if they cross to the other side of the road.

My community is getting bombed, murdered, with mayhem on the streets. This included men from every local street. It is very hard not to be involved. panel

Power has not brought resolution to conflict, only a level of control. So power is taken and held falsely and used abusively.

the powerful and power-refusers need to sit together and share power to displace fear. panel

Structures to control conflict have been put in place, some physical such as the peace wall, and some as powers through governance such as the Good Friday agreement.

The principle of consent needs cross community government and requires a relationship with the rebuilding projects Panel

Neither has brought about positive transformation.

Mediation Northern Ireland seeks to bring about transformation through:

Training opportunities.

Consultation e.g., working with senior police officers to understand cultural change.

Mediation Practice – neighbourhood disputes, business management and Community disorder (often secret)

A lived experience of conflict is the norm for all generations, and affects building blocks of community life such as the economy and education. Conflict is engrained deeply into the culture of Belfast

The workers felt that there is more segregation since the Peace Process started and more fear of the “other side” through ignorance, which is passed down from parents to children Fernhill

During the ‘troubles’, churches offered pastoral care to those of their own membership who were injured or bereaved. The church also demonstrated what has been described as ‘a bad theology of holiness’ meaning that it responded to particular human need without recognising the prophetic call to challenge wider issues of violence and injustice. However the church did quietly and in secret provide support, physical space and trusted commitment from clergy for brokering meetings over long periods. Churches ‘hung in’ with communities when others didn’t, offering dialogue, funerals, and a forum for contact when politicians chose to stay away.

The physical presence in the heart of the community

The Vines project is a physical out working of the gospel.

Contrary to popular myth, the Troubles are not primarily about religious hatred. The church whilst failing as architect in some areas, has also suffered as the victim in others.

The reality of Belfast today is the reality of a divided society, in which it is difficult for people to imagine a different future, but there is no satisfaction with that divide. So that calls for....

## Nature of transformation

The building has become cross cultural redemptive space, organic, small scale, and self-help/empowerment model. 174

Resolution is not an option, offering easy avoidance of the crucial issues at stake. When two sides meet and clash, it is like tectonic plates creating paradoxically the energy for something new, hence transformation.

we want justice, which is the creation of right relationships. We have to get involved with people because relationship comes before trust. For trust to be built, there has to be relationship. For relationship to begin, we have to invite. We need to celebrate and learn about difference, to build relationships. Panel

Reconciliation calls for a dialectical approach, working in the world as it has been given rather than as we might wish it to be.

Good examples of affirmative action encouraged by the Commission were noted. They contribute to the process of conflict transformation, ask key searching questions, work well with all groups and research and follow them well. Equality

Dialectic challenges the seductive attraction of fundamentalism, which offers an alluring security.

Transforming the nature of the conflict from violent encounter through dialogue to democratic exchange; and changing the nature of the relationships between those in conflict. Linc

Transformation therefore requires the re-direction of the energy expressed in the four languages of church, politics, history and culture. A new history and identity can be created, built on the profound hope that comes of God, a history therefore where politics, church and culture are moulded on Christian values.

The Church participates in transformation by:

- celebrating diverse identities;
- naming the powers, including the political, as political life is a divine gift;
- repentance and redemptive remembering, which is not the same as naïve forgetfulness;
- forgiveness, offered by those with the most right to withhold it; yet there is no public forgiveness without public grief for what is forgiven;
- openness to God's grace and spirit to bring transformation to the human condition, not just a reordering of the social furniture;

The elements of conflict include a suspicion and even hatred of the other, of 'them'. The Belfast context calls for a shift from 'them' to 'them and us'.

We have moved on as we don't see people as the enemy any more. I am doing what I do because I face conflict on my doorstep. panel

Before we can value the 'other', we need to feel secure in our own identity. That identity can be lifted to a higher plane than a defensive violence. It is not freedom from the other that is the greatest human need, but meaning.

We felt that those involved in leadership are also being transformed and challenged and have to change. vines

The deeper the transformation process, the harder these questions become. Those who can will escape or flee. Therefore transformation comes through those who have to stay, such as the poor. Transformed people become agents for change themselves, making visible the incarnation of Christ's grace.

The LINC was established by Billy Mitchell, ex loyalist prisoner who became a Christian during his imprisonment. The project was conceived in prison formalised in 1990.

They break the imprisoning oscillation between victim and bully.

Conflict transformation is about taking risks. panel

Personal choice is central to transformation, which drives political processes. It is only by choice that we can jump over the shadow of our experiences. Care needs to be taken with claims for what works, but there are models that have been offered:

- backing people who can move between different conflicting groups;
- working with practical activities which take people out of fear;
- finding examples of those who take risks and do things differently;
- becoming a trusted source to counter the powers built on distrust.
- recognising the move from accepting chaos to 'how do we manage here.'

Ultimately, transformation is the gift of risk and faith, which asks us to act in trust rather than certainty.

Using community development as a vehicle for cross cultural encounter to build trust and transformation in the local community. 174

## **Appendix**

- 1 Why transformation not resolution? Derek Poole
- 2 Reconciliation – what works? Duncan Morrow
- 3 Incarnation through Reconciliation to bring Transformation  
Bishop Donal McKeown

