

A Ministry of Mediation

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"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it had been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters."

1 Corinthians 1:10-11

The resolution of conflict is something that has interested me for many years, when asked on my ordination training course with NEOC a few years ago to pick a particular verse or phrase from the Bible, mine was "Blessed are the peacemakers" Having read the review of Yvonne Craig's book, "Peacemaking for Churches", in The Church Times in June 1999 (and subsequently read the book), I was clear that there was much to be done – in the world in general and churches in particular.

There are many relevant Biblical texts, including:

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation"

2 Corinthians 5:18

"Be careful that no one is deprived of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness should begin to grow and make trouble."

Hebrews 12:15

I believe we all have gifts which enable each of us to be peacemakers. We can all build bridges, whether in our places of work, our homes, or our churches. Everyday we are faced with choices – we can add fuel to the fires of dispute or we can work to help people resolve their differences.

About 4 years ago, a colleague of mine first suggested mediation as an area for me to pursue. At the time it sounded like one of those bright ideas friends have that don't really make sense to the recipient. On reflection it was a bit like a suggestion from a fellow churchgoer about 15 years ago that I should consider ordination! Well that one took about 10 years to sink in; I'm pleased to say that the idea of training to become a mediator matured rather quicker – maybe I'd learned something along the way.

There are many ways of dispute resolution – arbitration, litigation and many more. Each have their place. In this article, I will focus on Mediation.

Mediation is a process which uses a neutral third party to assist the disputing parties to reach their own settlement. It's a voluntary process in which the mediator seeks to explore the true feelings, aspirations, hopes and fears of the parties in an impartial, independent, confidential way. Unlike Arbiters and Judges, Mediators don't make any decisions, nor do they need expertise in the subject under discussion.

The key skills and behaviours for a mediator include: listening; being impartial, open, trustworthy; awareness of feelings of self and others and an ability to manage those appropriately; and an understanding of people and situations.

Mediation is now being used in a wide variety of areas:

Commercial: following the Wolf Report, many judges now refer cases to mediation to see if the parties can resolve the situation before taking them in court.

Community: many organisations, using volunteer mediators have grown up around the country over the last 10 years.

Family: helping couples who have decided to separate to sort out financial, property and child contact matters.

Medical, Schools (Peer & Specific Educational Needs), Victim / Offender, and Workplace are just some of the other areas where mediation is being used to help people resolve their disagreements.

What about within the church? We are called to reconcile ourselves with our brothers and sisters and yet there are so many disputes which fester and grow within churches. Disputes can be based on different views about a whole host of things – faith, beliefs, music, theology, ecclesiology - as well as all the differences found amongst people in the secular world.

'Grace and Peace' a phrase to be found at the beginning of most of St Paul's letters. Most churches spell out the importance of Grace, few place similar emphasis on Peace.

I will continue to practice my Ministry of Mediation in a wide variety of secular fields – Commercial, Community and Family – whilst seeking to develop it within the church. I would be keen to hear from others who are either already involved in this form of ministry or are interested in exploring it further.