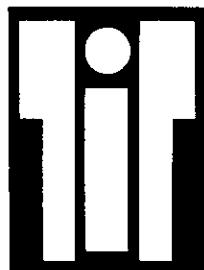


# Occasional Paper



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Conflict and  
Reconciliation:  
The Newham Experiment

Eric J. Miller

TIHR OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 9.

CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION: THE NEWHAM EXPERIMENT

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## PREFACE

The Newham Conflict and Change Project opened its doors at the beginning of February 1984. As a service to help in conciliating local disputes it was the first of its kind in Britain and at the time of drafting this paper, two years later, it/is still the only grass-roots project operated by voluntary conciliators drawn from the community that it serves. Currently there is news of others being developed.

'Experiment', especially when it refers to human undertakings, is an uncomfortable word for some people. It has associations with psychologists using humans as guinea-pigs. But if we think of its meaning as trying something out and learning from the experience it seems a very appropriate description of the Newham Project. For one thing, it has attracted a lot of attention in U.K. and abroad, and other people are drawing on the Newham experience to start projects of their own. And secondly, from the beginning, the culture of the Newham Project has always been one of learning from doing: if it works, try it again; if it doesn't, let's try another approach and see what happens. Actually, however, the members of the Project have been more scientific than that. They have learned that the complaints they hear from the parties to a neighbourhood dispute are only a part of the story; there are nearly always additional and underlying factors. So, like scientists, they develop a working hypothesis about what these underlying factors might be, and the alternative approach is based on that hypothesis and is a way of testing it.

It is in that experimental spirit that this paper itself is written. It is an attempt to distil at least some of the learning from the Project for the benefit both of those of us who have been involved in it and of others outside it.

My perspective in writing it comes from three years in the role of consultant to the Project. Indeed, the experimental culture of the Project goes back to a decision of the two original sponsors, Stephen Lowe and Paul Regan, to involve external consultants at an early stage in developing their ideas. Both had been members of conferences run by the Group Relations Training Programme (GRTP) of the Tavistock Institute or based on a similar approach - conferences which focus on underlying and often unconscious factors in relations between individuals and between groups. Their initial approach, in March 1982, was to Gordon Lawrence, who at that time was, with me, joint director of the GRTP. He, however, was about to leave the Institute to take up an appointment with Shell International in September 1982. After his initial consultations there was therefore a transitional period in which he and I were both intermittently involved with the incipient Project until February 1983, when he withdrew. By that time, the concept of the Project was becoming more clearly defined, and we were beginning to tackle the task of mobilizing local community organisations and recruiting volunteers. At this point Gerald French, who was on a part-time attachment to the Tavistock Institute, was introduced as a second consultant. He moved to Ireland in September 1984, and Tim Dartington (a former member of the Institute staff) was appointed to replace him in February 1985. Additional consultants have been brought in for the annual 'residential events' - three so far - which have been important in the development of the Project. Dartington had already taken part in the first of these; Olya Khaleelee in the first two. A further

consultant, Ainsley Forbes, became involved with the Project as a consultant in the latter part of 1985 and took part in the third residential event.

I acknowledge with gratitude my association both with these colleagues and with my clients - the two original sponsors, Stephen Lowe and Paul Regan; the Project Co-ordinator, Jonathan Gosling; the Administrative Assistant, Pauline Obee, and above all the local volunteers themselves. It is through their commitment, persistence, and willingness to expose themselves to uncertainty, frustration and even threats and abuse, that the original idea has been converted into a working reality.

I acknowledge also various comments and suggestions from some of these colleagues and clients on a first draft of this paper. These I have taken into account, but obviously the responsibility for this version rests with me. And it must be emphasised that this is not the "official history" of the Project: it is my version, written from the perspective of my role.

I should add that although six months have elapsed since my first draft, I have not updated the contents beyond the beginning of 1986.

The first part of this paper is an account of the early development of the Project. Part II describes the experience of the first two years. Finally, Part III attempts to set out some of the learning.

July 1986

E.J.M.

## I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT, 1982-1983

### Newham

The old east London boroughs of West Ham and East Ham were amalgamated into Newham as a result of the local government reorganisation of 1964. The present population is around 210,000. Racially, it is one of the most mixed populations in the country. In income per head it is also one of the poorest. The southern boundary is the River Thames, where the once thriving docklands are deserted and promised redevelopment is still barely visible; to the west is the River Lea.

Historically the Lea was the eastern boundary of London proper. Centuries before modern planning controls, noxious industries such as tanning and chemical processing were confined to the east of the Lea. (The prevailing wind blows from the west.) Correspondingly, this locality was also a staging-post for immigrants from other parts of the British Isles and abroad who were looking for the streets paved with gold. Their aim was to stay only until they could afford to move to somewhere more salubrious and prosperous. Outside the docklands, a minority of the inhabitants see themselves as having roots in the locality.

The last 30 years have brought a big influx of immigrants from overseas - especially from the Caribbean islands and the Indian sub-continent, but also from Africa, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. And over the last decade, with the increase in unemployment in Britain generally, it has been more difficult for immigrants to move through and out of Newham. A quarter of the population are old age pensioners (half of them living alone); 17,000 are registered unemployed. One dwelling in six is officially classified as unfit for human habitation; as many again lack basic amenities (bath, inside toilet, hot water) or are otherwise 'substandard'. Many buildings were destroyed or damaged by bombs in World War II. The 109 council-owned tower-blocks, erected in the '50s and '60s to solve the housing problem, include Ronan Point and a number of others which, being unsafe, are now having to be evacuated and demolished.

The incidence of offences against person and property is high; disputes often escalate into violence; and allegations of racial harassment are frequent.

### The Beginnings

Both the original sponsors of the Project were already actively involved in the local community through church projects. Paul Regan, a methodist minister, was director of the Renewal Programme, which was an established ecumenical initiative undertaking developments beyond the scope of local congregations. Stephen Lowe was the rector of the anglican parish of East Ham, where the local church was becoming the focus of more and more community development activities: English language teaching for Asian women was just one example.

To quote from Regan's initial letter to the Tavistock Institute:

'For several years we have been looking with interest at the material produced by the "Institute for Mediation and Conflict Resolution" in New York. They have taken the work done in industrial arbitration and conciliation and applied the body of experience gained in this field to the tensions and disputes which arise in the community generally. They have established a series of training programmes for those

professionally engaged in conflict management. They have also trained volunteers capable of acting as conciliators for a wide range of disputes arising in the Harlem and Bronx communities.

'It appears to us that there is scope for such a project in this country and I have been discussing with the Home Office and a number of statutory and voluntary agencies in the London Borough of Newham the possibility of designing a pilot project which could be tested here ...'

This letter went on to ask whether the Tavistock Institute would be an appropriate body to consult on establishing such an experiment and perhaps providing training in the necessary skills.

That New York scheme was only one of a great many local projects that had sprung up, principally in the United States, but also in Canada and Australia, in the early and middle 1970s. Some were quite directly tied to the courts, which offered mediation as an alternative to civil and in some instances even criminal proceedings. Others were grass-roots projects using local volunteers to intervene in local disputes. Approaches to mediation were often quite formal - almost like judicial hearings - and culminated in written agreements between the disputing parties. This applied particularly to referrals from the courts. But even in projects not linked to the courts there seemed to be increasing standardization in methods of mediation, which was encouraged by a burgeoning of training courses: mediation was almost becoming a new profession, located somewhere between law and social work.\*

In North America these new projects evidently filled a gap between the courts on the one side and, on the other, the informal and often unrecognized processes in community groupings that prevent at least some local disputes from getting out of hand. In Britain, however, there had so far been no such development. Perhaps the nearest was the Family Conciliation Service set up in Bristol in the late 1970s to mediate in the early stages of divorce proceedings, especially in order to help the divorcing couple to reach an acceptable agreement over children. That particular scheme is linked to the courts and has the support of local solicitors. With that small exception, there was little sign in British courts of a wish to offload some of their work; so one of the stimuli that had been important in the States was missing. Britain is in any case a less litigious society. That does not necessarily imply that there are fewer disputes - for example, between neighbours - but perhaps people are more inclined either to leave them unresolved or to seek redress in other ways - for example, by getting councillors or other local leaders, social workers, housing officers or the police to intervene.

Regan and Lowe recognized that North American approaches could not be unquestioningly imported: ways of working had to be developed to fit the British and indeed the Newham scene. Moreover they were working with a conception of the roots of conflict and of the ultimate aims of conciliation that extended way beyond a local mediation service.

Their first document setting out this conception was written in June 1982, following an initial meeting with a Tavistock Institute consultant. It was entitled 'Society in Transition: Newham Institute for Reconciliation'. They

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\* Substantial bibliographies on the theory and practice of mediation and conciliation have recently been published in Marshall (1984) and Marshall & Walpole (1985).

began by pointing to the various shifts that add up to a society in transition: technological change; the loss of full employment; the erosion of defined ways of relating, within families and between generations; and the emergence of multi-racial urban communities. Stresses and strains show up in a variety of ways: for example, mental breakdown, drug dependency, divorce, heart disease, riots, racial intimidation, full prisons, and an explosion of new legislation. Transition generates uncertainty, which tends to divide people. They fight each other, 'in industrial relations, in politics, in the courts, on the football terraces and in the streets.' Uncertainties and conflicts are especially evident in inner city communities - such as Newham. In face of all the differences and diversities, reconciliation might seem 'an impossible dream'. At the ultimate level of shared humanity itself we may 'discover a unity of experience'; but individuals and groups in conflict perceive their worlds in fundamentally different ways and may indeed rely for their own identity on the difference from the other.

'... If this is allowed to go unchallenged the experience of "us" and "them" can become destructive - a denial of the other person's humanity.

'To the extent that we have permitted an impersonal society to develop, in which individuals and groups feel powerless and anonymous, unnoticed and unwanted, we have already gone a long way to depersonalize our own and our neighbour's experience of life. To the extent that our institutions have embodied this process of losing individuals in the size and bureaucracy of their organisations, we are compounding the difficulty.

'In what way can the destructive process be reversed? Do we flee to the outer suburbs to follow many of Newham's former residents? Or can we sit and talk through our differences, without minimizing them, but also without exacerbating them? How can the fears, the hurt and the anger be recognized, owned and used in creative conflict?'

The paper gave as an example the Bristol conciliation service for divorcing parents. Instead of children 'being used as pawns in the battle or the spoil to be won at the end of the day ...., creative solutions have been worked out which affirm the children and the humanity of their parents ....'

'However, the conciliation process only enables parties involved in a dispute to establish a modus vivendi within the existing perception of the meaning of his or her own life. The pace of change in a society in transition is such that the inner security that the individual needs to experience in order to function adequately within his society is threatened. For example, what meaning does he have for his life if employment which is a necessary precondition of the individual discovering personal value is no longer available? What are the reference points for individuals both black and white finding themselves a part of cultures which are mysterious and divorced from their own childhood and formative experience? A search for a lost dependency in a lifestyle which may have disappeared can involve the flight or fight which is so characteristic of the inner-city experience.

'.... However important a conciliation process may be to enable communication to take place, an immediate resolution of the presenting problems is only a first step, necessary but limited. The task of the Institute of Reconciliation is to provide the means whereby conciliation can take place in the first instance and then, through the communication

that has been established, to explore a new basis of meaning in the community for both institutions and the individuals involved' (emphasis added).

That June 1982 paper was used to approach several charitable trusts. Regan and Lowe had earlier canvassed key people in the local statutory and voluntary agencies, and also the police and the Home Office, about a possible 'conflict resolution programme'; but no further steps could be taken until funding became available. In November/December the Cadbury Trust offered an initial grant, and planning began in earnest.

### Building the Institution

At a meeting in mid-December a plan of action was prepared. Some of the key steps were:

- mail invitations to potential 'counsellors' (as the prospective volunteers were then called) in early February;
- hold an initial meeting of sponsors, counsellors and consultants in March;
- recruit a Co-ordinator for the project;
- arrange a 3-day residential training event for May, 'to be attended by 36 selected potential counsellors and the new Co-ordinator';
- find premises;
- prepare a constitution.

Very early in 1983 it became clear not simply that this time-table was much too tight (which probably all of us tacitly realized), but that the way in which this preparatory phase was managed would be critical for the future development of the project. Three considerations were particularly important.

First it had become progressively clearer that the volunteers should, so far as possible, represent the full diversity of Newham, in terms of race, class, gender, age and so on. At first it had been thought that they might be people who lived and worked in Newham; but that was too exclusive. In a second formulation, living or working in Newham were alternatives; but this might have a distorting effect. One hypothesis was that the capacity of Newham as a community (or of each of the various communities within Newham) to solve its own problems had been 'stolen' by the 'experts' - the middle class professionals and administrators -, most of whom, whilst their jobs were in Newham, lived in more salubrious suburbs. The final policy that emerged, therefore, was that the volunteers should be people who lived in Newham. Middle-class volunteers as such were not excluded - their professional skills and experience were welcome - but the experience of actually dwelling in Newham was crucial. (Underlying this decision was almost certainly a local feeling of being exploited by these 'experts' who made a living out of Newham's problems but spent the rest of their lives outside.) If the Project was to draw its volunteers from a genuinely wide mix, reflecting local differences, then a systematic effort would have to be made to contact the full variety of community groupings.

This was also directly linked to the second consideration. The intended 'clients' of the Project - people in dispute who might use a conciliation service and the wider public whom the Project was aiming to reach through its educational activities - also needed to reflect the full diversity of the local population. So recruiting volunteers for the Project and 'marketing' its services to potential referrers and users went hand in hand.

Thirdly, we were very conscious that the two sponsors were both Christian ministers and both white males, and that the consultants came from outside Newham and were also white males. If this was to become a Newham Project, then the concept and the aims had to be shaped, developed and accepted by the prospective Newham volunteers and Newham clients. The initial phase of publicizing the Project had to allow this process to happen.

This process was set in hand at a day of meetings early in February 1983, first with some associates of the two sponsors - people who had heard of the idea in its early stages and were now being updated -, and second with local political leaders, local government officers, the Police Commander of the district, a representative of the Newham magistrates, and other key figures: this was a working lunch hosted by the Mayor of Newham. A revised working paper had been sent to all the participants in advance. The message that came back from these meetings was that Newham welcomed the intentions of the sponsors, but .... There were several 'buts':- The concepts being put forward - particularly about 'society in transition' - were difficult to grasp; the language was high-falutin ('too many long words and long sentences'); 'institute of reconciliation' sounded too theoretical; and while the idea of a conciliation service made practical sense, there were some - including the mayor herself, who had been born and brought up in Newham - who doubted whether people would want to expose their disputes to outsiders. This was also a hint that the project would be poaching in areas that properly belonged to the politicians and the local government agencies ('we're doing it already'). Whilst the 'buts' were counterbalanced by positive voices, there was no sign of a rush of enthusiastic volunteers.

Originally it had been hoped that the sponsors, through their various networks, would send invitations to a public meeting in East Ham in March, and from that the requisite volunteers would come forward. It was now clear that beyond that - before and after - it would be necessary to involve a wide range of community groups in a series of smaller meetings which would be consultations rather than just presentations. Such consultations would mobilize potential volunteers from minority groups who would be diffident about attending a larger public meeting; and also the volunteers would be more committed and the Project itself more relevant if they had a voice in shaping it. That also meant that the language describing the task, aims and methods had to be intelligible.

Consultation and participation, however, arouse anxieties about dilution: those aims and objectives that are most readily understandable and acceptable are not necessarily the most appropriate. As one of the consultants (the author) wrote after that first February day of meetings:

'One problem for me was an oscillation during the day between two conceptions: were we in the "reconciliation" business or were we in the "studying society-in-transition" business? I came away .... wanting to reiterate that the latter is the primary task. That is to say, the institute/centre is primarily concerned with helping the people of Newham to understand the societal processes in which they are involved - including, importantly, displacement of conflict. That is manifestly an

educational activity .... The provision of a reconciliation service is then to be seen in that context as a means of identifying and interpreting the societal processes, and of extending understanding into the community through the clients of that process. In the longer run, reconciliation has to be seen as only one of a possible set of activities through which the institute/centre will relate to Newham and fulfil its educational function. I can envisage other kinds of specifically educational activities, such as seminars, conferences, inter-group meetings, as well as consultancy to community groupings and organisations and also cooperative research studies, as all falling within the ambit of this enterprise...'

A Co-ordinator for the Project was appointed in March 1983, initially part-time. He had another role as a literacy teacher, which turned out to be an unexpected asset. It provided a criterion for any material written about the Project: it had to be cast in a language that his students could understand. (Indeed, one of his students - a plumber - happened to live in Newham and almost became a volunteer.) The sponsors and consultants rose to this challenge. First, the title of the Project needed to become more comprehensible. After a number of consultative meetings it became the 'Newham Conflict and Change Project'. And second, the aims and objectives had to be re-written. Here is the version from a leaflet that was widely distributed in Newham from June 1983 onwards:

#### THE PROJECT - some of the thinking behind it.

'It is clear that our society is going through a lot of change. Technological changes, housing problems, unemployment and the nuclear arms race, often make us feel we are victims of forces that we can't control. At the same time, social values appear to be changing. We can no longer rely on people around us thinking in the same way as we do, and many of the old patterns seem to be out of place in the new conditions we find ourselves in.

'This can make people feel lost or insecure, not quite sure who they are. Not having a job can make things worse - the individual may feel he or she is of no use to society.

'This kind of situation often makes people angry and frustrated. We look for someone to blame, perhaps to attack. They are probably not really to blame, but that doesn't matter to us: by directing our anger at someone we find a sense of purpose and dignity again. By picking on another group or individual like this it becomes easier to be sure of our own identity.

'Another way people cope with all this uncertainty is by withdrawing into their shells. They may belong to small tightly-knit groups which turn their backs on the rest of the world and try to pretend that nothing has changed. Others don't find a way of coping. For many the stress is too much, and this accounts for a lot of mental and physical illness, heavy drinking and drug-taking.

'Newham has more than its share of these problems of change, and not surprisingly, it also has a fair amount of local conflict.

'We are all aware of tension between ethnic groups; splits inside community groupings, and on a smaller scale, quarrels between neighbours. From the outside, and even to the people involved, it often

seems that the conflict is more intense than the issues justify. Emotions run higher and higher, positions harden, and the fight seems unstoppable. It may culminate in a legal battle or physical violence.

'Sometimes disputes arise from simple misunderstandings; but often the causes are more complicated. This is where the idea of a conciliation service comes in.

'If people in conflict could sort out real differences from imaginary ones, they may be able to come to a shared understanding of their situation. In any case, they should be able to direct their energy in more constructive ways and to help improve the quality of life for everyone. There will always be differences among individuals and groups, but they needn't always be threatening or develop into a fight. The difference between men and women is the most creative difference of all!

'The aim of the Newham Conflict & Change Project is to set up and run such a conciliation service, together with an education programme to improve our understanding of these issues.'

Although the aims of the Project were becoming defined in a more intelligible and acceptable way, potential volunteers still had doubts about what they might be letting themselves in for. They were having to commit themselves to take part in what, by this time, was described as 'a four-day residential Training Conference' and, to give adequate time for recruitment, had been re-scheduled for November, 1983. A series of four workshops was therefore designed to continue the process of consultation and to give a foretaste of the residential event.

The first workshop was an all-day occasion, on a Saturday; the others were evening programmes, lasting about 3-4 hours. Participants - on average 12-15 - would gather over snacks; then, after an introduction, came an inter-group role-play exercise, an exploration of conflict in Newham, and a discussion of plans for the Project. In the exercise, participants were assigned to three groups - 'Asians', 'white youths' and 'police', though their actual membership was heterogeneous - and given a short scenario (white youths had allegedly been harassing an Asian family which complained of police inaction etc.). After meeting separately to assume their roles, there were confrontations between each of the three pairs of groups, with the third group observing. The exercise ended in a collective de-briefing. The rationale was that prospective conciliators needed some capacity to put themselves into the shoes of their clients, and in addition needed to recognise how readily differences become polarizations. Commonly, for example, people assigned to the 'Police' group found it difficult at first to identify with that role. Faced with attacks from the other two groups, however, they would unexpectedly find themselves quite authoritarian. So the workshop offered some insight into the dynamics of conflict, but did not explore approaches to conciliation: that needed more time and would have to wait for the residential event.

Leaflets advertising the workshops emphasised that volunteers were not expected to have 'qualifications': 'Common sense and an ability to listen are more important.' (Also 'a serious intent to do something useful for the community': they would be committing themselves to 2-3 hours a week.) Implicitly, of course, there were other qualifications: for example, a willingness to meet strangers; to expose oneself in disputes that might be quite highly charged; to expose oneself also to colleagues; to make mistakes

and to try to learn from them; and so on. Correspondingly, the workshops were an implicit selection procedure. Among the sponsors, the Co-ordinator and the consultants there was anxiety about having to reject candidates who were 'unsuitable' - though there was no clear notion of how that might be defined. In the event, the problem did not arise: the workshops turned out to be an effective procedure for self-selection, and individuals who seemed as though they might be difficult to work with - usually because of difficulty in listening - selected themselves out.

The greater anxiety was that the initial panel of volunteers would not be adequately representative of the local population - that there would be a preponderance of white middle-class professionals. An intensive effort was therefore made to get people in other categories to come to the workshops.

The residential event in November 1983 was held in an Elizabethan stately home in rural Suffolk. It would be hard to find a more complete contrast to Newham. The house now belongs to a Roman Catholic religious order; and - an unplanned coincidence - the very old adjoining church is called the 'Church of Reconciliation'. Eighteen volunteers assembled, along with the Co-ordinator and four consultants.

Among the volunteers, there were equal numbers of men and women. Two-thirds were white, and five Afro-Caribbean, but there was only one Asian - two others having dropped out at the last moment. Occupationally, they described themselves as follows:

Administrators/secretaries	6
Bus conductor	1
Community workers, full time	3
Community workers, part time	1
Housewives	2
Minister	1
Post Office worker	1
Unemployed	3

A few who had taken unpaid leave to attend were having their earnings made up out of Project funds. Most had other Newham connections with at least one or two others, and some, of course, had been together at workshops; but as a whole they had met only briefly a day or two before, to make all practical arrangements for travelling to Suffolk.

One aim of the four days was therefore to help this collection of volunteers to become a working group. More specific aims were to increase their understanding of conflict and co-operation within the community, and to develop ways of tackling conciliation that would be practical and relevant to Newham.

It had been seen as a strength of the Project that the diversity of the volunteers should reflect some of the diversity of the Newham population; this was a potential asset that needed to be mobilized. A corresponding anxiety, of course, was that the wide range of differences would be uncontrollable and would blow the group apart. As a defence against this there might be a tendency to deny differences and to pretend that everyone was the same. With this in mind, an inter-group exercise was devised, and this occupied much of the first 24 hours of the residential event. The total group of members were asked to form themselves into sub-groups on whatever basis they wished, and then to study the relatedness between the sub-groups. In this way, they were able to engage with issues around some of the key

differences: colour, gender and class. In addition, building on the experience of the workshops, participants were able to learn more about ways in which all of us get caught up unwittingly in 'them and us' feelings. Although religious affiliation did not come up as an issue within the inter-group exercise itself, it emerged that apart from the self-declared minister half the others in paid employment worked within the Christian church or church-based organisations, and there was concern that the Project should not become, or be seen as, church-dominated.

Over the remaining three days, participants spent a number of sessions in small groups of six, each as mixed as possible. Drawing on their own experience and on case examples provided by the consultants, they role-played a variety of conflicts and ways of conciliating. Each group had the task of distilling lessons, ideas, hypotheses and suggestions, which were written up on flip charts and then shared in periodic meetings of the whole group (in the great hall of the Elizabethan mansion). Although the residential event had originally been billed as 'training', this was not training in the conventional sense. The emphasis was on helping the volunteers, both collectively and also individually, to draw on their own experience and skills and to develop their own approaches and ways of working; and, in addition, to try to be explicit about what they were doing and why, so that if one approach failed they would be better able to analyse the reasons and to devise an alternative that might be more effective. In this way the Project would develop a culture of learning from the collective experience, while at the same time individual volunteers would be encouraged to take authority to use their own distinctive experience and skills. Nonetheless, there was strong pressure on the consultants, both at this initial event and subsequently, to teach the volunteers what they should do: this dilemma is discussed more fully below. In fact, the collective wisdom that emerged was impressive: the Co-ordinator's edited summary of the flip-chart material is attached in Appendix 1.

Most of the volunteers assembled for a follow-up meeting on December 15. They shared feedback from contacts in Newham about the Project; they discussed an enquiry about possible intervention in a conflict among a group of professionals; they inspected their new premises; they discussed fund-raising; they set dates for a series of fortnightly meetings for the first half of 1984, including a review after six months; and the meeting then became a social occasion.

The Newham Conflict and Change Project was ready to start work.

## II. THE PROJECT IN ACTION, 1984-1985

### The Reconciliation Service

The reconciliation service officially became available from the beginning of February. Leaflets describing the overall aims of the Project, and the reconciliation service in particular, were sent out to a long list of community groups, agencies and others, including the police and local solicitors, who might make referrals. A simplified version was also prepared, illustrated with drawings by one of the volunteers. This was printed in half a dozen Indian languages as well as in English. The local newspaper published an article on the Project.

Even before this publicity went out, enquiries were coming in. Although one or two critics questioned the legitimacy of the service, most comments were supportive, and there were tentative referrals: for example, how might the Project help to deal with a deep division of views in an organisation about to receive a royal visit; or intervene in a problem between a youth club and local residents? These particular enquiries came to nothing, because the people raising them lacked the authority to commit the parties concerned.

By the end of 1984, over 40 cases had been taken on; 1985 brought another 40. Almost 80 per cent were problems with an immediate neighbour - next-door, above, below - and a few others involved a cluster of neighbours, in a block of flats or in a street. Four or five came from organisations but, as with those two preliminary enquiries, it often turned out that the person who negotiated with the Project did not have enough backing from the wider group.

In nearly a third of the neighbour disputes the main presenting problem was the physical boundary itself: the fence or wall (needing repair, or allegedly encroaching on the complainant's land, or, in one instance, a belief that the new neighbours had actually made the party wall thinner); or an actual or proposed extension to the neighbour's house, cutting off light. As well as being a supplementary complaint in some of these cases, noise was the principal issue in at least another quarter of the neighbour disputes. A third common complaint was of harassment or intimidation - presented as the primary issue in some cases and as an additional factor in others. In a few cases this was quite explicitly racial - white/black - but in others the ethnic or cultural differences may also have played a part: for example, Turkish Cypriot versus Indian; Jamaican versus Dominican. Race was also a variable in some of the 'boundary' and 'noise' complaints, and in one or two of the tenant/landlord disputes, but the existence of a racial difference did not mean that it was necessarily the principal issue at stake. Thus in one case involving native English tenants and an Indian landlord it seemed that the legal/financial elements were much more important than the racial.

Referrals came through a wide range of sources: including police (some of whom had attended the workshops), solicitors, councillors, M.P.s, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, social workers and community organisations. Some individuals also presented themselves after hearing of the Project through leaflets, the press or word of mouth. The Project adopted the principle of asking referring agencies to recommend potential clients to make their own approach: all referrals had to be self-referrals.

One phenomenon in the inner city is that, justifiably or not, certain individuals and families become labelled as 'problems'. They are referred -

or, to be more accurate, 'dumped' - between one agency and another - the social services department, the housing department, the health service, the police, voluntary bodies, and so on. Inevitably, the Conflict and Change Project received its share of these - the sick and confused, the lost and lonely.

During the residential event, when the volunteers were trying to anticipate how they would operate, they expected that commonly the two parties to the conflict would come to the Project office where probably a pair of conciliators would help them to come to some resolution. This expectation was shaped by what was known of the American mediation programmes, where in court-linked services the referral is, of course, always of both parties, while other services commonly accept cases only when both parties are willing. In practice, not one of the referrals coming to the Project has been neatly 'packaged' in this way. The typical Newham case is of an individual complaining about the behaviour of another party and seeking to get the Project to do something about it. In some cases the conciliators do not even get to meet the other party; in many others they shuttle between the two; but seldom if ever do they set up a joint session.

What has turned out as expected, however, is working in pairs. And the pair of volunteers assigned to a case are chosen where possible to reflect the range of differences among the Project members - for example, a black man and a white woman, working class and middle class. This reduces the risk of getting caught up in taking sides, and also carries the message that people who are evidently very different can work constructively and positively together. (Some clients have also been impressed that these are actually volunteers, willing to give up their spare time to help people sort out their conflicts.)

The fortnightly members' meetings have been the formal source of support for conciliators. Cases are reported; hypotheses about underlying factors in the conflict are shared and developed; possible next steps are considered; and, implicitly, the authority of the conciliators, as acting on behalf of the Project, is reaffirmed. A second major support between meetings has been the Co-ordinator, who has always been ready to listen to the volunteers and offer both encouragement and practical suggestions. The need for such support is considerable. In the typical mediation approach, the commitment to the clients is limited, and at the end of the mediation session it is often possible to chalk up some degree of success. 'Reconciliation', on the other hand, is a much more open-ended notion, which may call for perseverance over a long period, and criteria of 'success' are much more elusive. This issue is further discussed in Part III below.

### Outreach and Education

It was easy enough to say that the Project had a broader educational objective, but more difficult to design a plan of action to attain it. The first aim in any case was to establish the reconciliation service itself. Through that, the Project would begin to acquire legitimacy in Newham, and its wider educational role - whatever that turned out to be - would then be based on the experience of tackling actual conflicts.

One basic proposition, of course, was that the incidence of local conflict is at least in part a consequence or symptom of the major transitions occurring in society, the effects of which are amplified in the inner city. It was hardly possible to apply that proposition directly in

tackling specific disputes; but if the Project was ever to concern itself with prevention, and not merely with 'treatment', then it was important to hang on to that way of thinking. Accordingly, a standard item on the agenda of the fortnightly meetings became: 'What's going on in Newham?'. Sometimes this has produced no more than bits of factual information; or the item has been squeezed out entirely by other work. At its best it leads to analysis of significant events - for example, the eviction of a white family from a council flat for racial harassment - or of issues in which members themselves are involved - for example, an exploration of the very different experiences and feelings of a black woman and a white man taking part in a demonstration protesting against police action (the white man being strongly anti-police and the black woman taking a more detached position). So far, however, the Project as such has not found a way of formulating its observations and analyses and feeding them back to the community. If proposals for a newsletter come to fruition, this would provide the vehicle, and that may encourage the Project to develop a collective voice.

The links that the various members have with very different sectors of local society are one of the Project's assets. It would be grandiose to call them 'ambassadors' of the Project, but they certainly give some publicity to the Project in their other roles and, conversely, whether members intend it or not, other people will be making judgments about the Project on the basis of what they see these members doing. Some members have noticed that their Project experience has led them to behave differently - more reflectively, more positively, less fearfully - in other situations. On a tiny scale, this is education by example.

Although initial priority had been given to the reconciliation, a start was made with more explicit local educational activity. A library on conflict was being built up as a local resource. An introductory visit to a comprehensive school showed the possibilities of more intensive work as and when resources became available.

Workshops continued to be offered periodically, and whilst they still had the function of displaying the Project to potential volunteers they were increasingly seen as primarily directed to educating the public - especially by demonstrating how easily and unwittingly one can get drawn into a 'them-and-us' position. Design and management of the workshops was progressively taken over by the members, with reduced participation of the consultants. One workshop was designed especially for Urdu speakers, at the suggestion of a local Muslim body. Interpreters were mobilized and given advance preparation in a workshop of their own. In the event, everyone who attended spoke English and the interpreters became enthusiastic participants.

Some members learned more about their own prejudices and ambivalences in a day-long workshop involving six volunteers and a similar number of police. The community liaison officer and one or two other police had been involved in the Project from the early stages, and this event was designed to compare approaches and values. It was difficult for both groups to avoid getting caught up in the polarized attitudes of the inner city.

#### External Linkages

News of the Newham Project was quickly picked up by the national media. The Co-ordinator and various volunteers found themselves being interviewed for the press, radio and television, attending conferences, and giving talks. Community groups in other areas visited Newham, and some asked for

consultation on setting up conciliation schemes of their own. The Project also began to be asked to run workshops outside Newham - for example, for the housing officers of another London borough.

Some visitors came from abroad, and overseas links were greatly increased after the Co-ordinator and one of the volunteers (an Asian woman) spent a month in the United States, attending a conference on conflict resolution and visiting a range of American projects to see how they worked. The report they wrote got a wide circulation. It also reassured the Newham group themselves that their own approach to conciliation, though it was difficult, demanding and at times discouraging, was preferable to the more superficial models of mediation that were mostly used elsewhere.

So there was a certain pride in being the innovators, in at the beginning of a burgeoning movement in the U.K. The Home Office Research and Planning Unit published a survey of British reparation, conciliation and mediation projects (Marshall 1984) and a revised and enlarged edition a year later (Marshall & Walpole 1985). Both reports highlighted the Newham venture. An academic initiated a national Forum for Initiatives in Reparation and Mediation (FIRM), which held its inaugural conference in April 1985. The long-standing Conflict Research Unit at City University launched a quarterly newsletter, called Mediation.

#### Organisation and Management

The Project's first letterhead included the names of the sponsors, the Co-ordinator and the consultants, but the sponsors wanted to make their role redundant as speedily as possible: the Project was to be managed by the volunteers themselves. (The more conventional alternative, of forming a management committee of influential people, not actively involved in the work, was, if entertained at all, immediately discarded.) Accordingly January 1984 saw the formation of a 'Working Party on Management', which became an interim informal managing group until a more permanent appropriate structure could be established.

The immediate practical problem was staffing the office. At first, the Co-ordinator was available only two days a week, and it was another year before funding increased to a level to support a full-time Co-ordinator and part-time administrative assistant. So much of the time a rota of volunteers had to cover the office and telephone. Although this became more and more of a chore, initially it had the advantage of forcing the group to devise a shared way of presenting the Project to outsiders and managing enquiries.

By May 1984 it seemed timely for the volunteers to take over management of the Project, though 'management' was not an entirely acceptable word. Three areas were seen as in need of more specialized attention: outreach, or community relations; finance, fund-raising and administration; and training and the monitoring of development. Everyone opted for at least one of the three working parties that were formed; convenors were elected; and the three convenors met periodically with the Co-ordinator as a steering group. Final authority remained with the membership as a whole, which was meeting fortnightly.

The structure was explicitly experimental, though in fact it continued unchanged for 18 months. At the second residential event, in November 1984, existing volunteers re-confirmed their membership of the working parties, newcomers made their choices, and the groups developed policies and made plans.

Although things got done and decisions made - for example, fund-raising was effective and the training group designed and managed the 1985 workshops themselves, including development of new case material - there were difficulties. One was a boundary issue: the workshops were defined as having an educational function, but surely that was also part of the responsibility of the working party on community relations? Secondly, there were problems of attendance. Case-work could be time-consuming and for some members fully took up the 2-3 hours a week they had undertaken to give. Then there were the fortnightly meetings. So working party meetings tended to take lowest priority, particularly for members in full-time employment. Attendance was often poor, and increasingly decisions and actions had to be undertaken personally by the relevant convenor. Or proposals were referred to a fortnightly meeting which itself was both poorly attended and too preoccupied with cases to give much attention to 'business'. So necessary decisions were not taken, or if they were taken, it was uncertain how much consent they carried from the membership. In this vacuum of membership authority, the Co-ordinator was increasingly put into the position of unilaterally committing the Project - for example, in providing speakers at a conference - and persuading and cajoling individuals to meet the commitments. As time went by, this happened even with referrals. Instead of management by the membership, he was operating as the director without authority and with uncertain support.

As participation dwindled it became starkly apparent that the core of the power-holders - the Co-ordinator and the three convenors (and also the two consultants) - were all middle-class, male and white. This had been noted early on as a potential issue, but so long as many others were involved it had not seemed to matter. And after all the convenors had been chosen by the membership for their leadership and organising capability .... So the Project was slipping into the trap of many other multi-racial endeavours: unconsciously, it was reproducing the power structure of the wider society.

The Project reached its lowest ebb in June 1985. The half-yearly review meeting was poorly attended; whites were yet again in the majority; the Co-ordinator felt isolated; individuals were depressed by their performance as conciliators; and there was a general sense of failure.

Already by this stage a potential black (male) consultant had been approached, with the conscious aim of providing an alternative figure with whom non-white members might identify, and hence enhance their sense of their own authority; and he began to attend the depleted fortnightly meetings. There was a temporary spurt in attendance as the volunteers who were at the June review came to recognise that it was their responsibility, not the Co-ordinator's, to remind people about attendance. But the major effort to shift the culture and structure had to wait until the third residential event in October 1985.

This time the event, spread over four days, was held at a Roman Catholic conference centre in the northern outskirts of London. Of the 20 volunteers who enrolled, 12 were 'old-timers' - others for various reasons were unable to come - and three of these dropped out at the last minute, two - a married couple - because of domestic illness. One of the 8 newcomers was also a 'no-show'. And attendance of some of the others was not 100 per cent. The design was much the same as in previous years, starting with an inter-group exercise, but this time the presence of a black consultant made it more difficult to evade differences among members, especially ethnic differences,

and the feelings they aroused. A white consultant was accused of racism for pointing out that all the members of one sub-group were Asians. In a plenary session on the last morning it was the non-white voices that predominated.

Time was set aside in the programme to review the organisation of the Project. One key change agreed by the members was the formation of three area groups, which would receive referrals through the central office and take responsibility for allocating them to conciliators, providing mutual support, and keeping the office informed of progress. The three skeleton teams met briefly during the event and chose their provisional link-persons. All were Afro-Caribbean women, and one was completely new to the Project. The three link-persons were to be part of a structure of honorary offices which included a number of new roles: Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, Director of Training, and Director of Education and Resource Centre. An interim steering committee was authorized to manage the transition until election of the new officers could be formalized at an annual general meeting. The elections produced Asians in the Chair and Vice-Chair - a woman and a man respectively. Both the Vice-Chair and the Director of Education were also new recruits.

The Project therefore entered its third year with a management that fully reflected its character as a multi-ethnic undertaking. Also, the key positions were much more equally shared between women and men. The second residential event, the year before, had disclosed an implied class distinction between supposedly knowledgeable 'old-timers' and novices, and that had persisted for a while in the beginning of the second year (a process that had tended to reinforce the prevailing white male leadership). This new structure, however, accommodated both old and new as well as black and white. Moreover, although for a long time lip-service had been paid to the idea that volunteers could make a useful contribution to the Project without necessarily being active as conciliators, conciliation had remained the central and prestigious activity and non-conciliators were implicitly inferior. Now, however, there seemed to have been a cultural shift, in which different kinds of contribution could be much more equally valued.

One question still unresolved at the end of 1985 was the future of external consultancy. Now that the membership had discovered their own authority, they were uncertain what they wanted from the existing consultants or indeed whether they needed any at all.

### III. LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

In this final part I try to distil something of what has been learned or might be learned from the experience so far, by picking up some central themes: the nature of conflicts; alternative approaches to intervention and some of the hazards involved; and requirements for consultancy, training and support. In conclusion, I tentatively compare intentions and achievements.

#### The Anatomy of Conflicts and Modes of Intervention

As I noted earlier, cases have not presented themselves to the Project in the form that had originally been expected. The idealized picture had been of two disputants, probably at the instigation of an influential third party (solicitor, clergyman, community leader etc.), jointly approaching the Project for help in reaching a settlement. Conciliation was not expected to be easy - role-plays at the first residential event suggested there could be quite violent confrontations - but on the other hand there was an assumption of at least some underlying desire to find a resolution. By contrast, in practice most referrals have come in the form of a complaint by one party, usually with an explicit or implied request that the Project should do something to change or control the behaviour of the other party. Such complainants present themselves as victims, and usually the Project is cast in the role of dragon-killer.

Here therefore, I first review the main types of case that fall into this category, together with modes of responding, and then turn to the situations in which the Project is asked to help in solving problems within and between organisations.

Three patterns seem particularly common:-

- i) The Invisible Other. In these instances, the complainant stipulates from the outset that the other party is not to be approached. Intimidation is often the presenting problem. For example, an Asian family complains that white neighbours are shouting insults at them, throwing rubbish into their garden, or damaging their property. Or an elderly woman claims that her informal tenants are not paying their rent, or stealing her money. Or again, a flat-dweller complains that her neighbours upstairs are piping poison through the ceiling. Invariably, the people bringing these problems say that they are afraid that contacting the other party would only make matters worse, by escalating, for example, the intimidation or violence. They refuse to be persuaded that the problem is unlikely to be resolved unless the other party is involved.
- ii) The 'Innocent' Other. This might also be called the 'one-way conflict'. The catalogue of complaints brought by the first party seems to have nothing to do with the experience of the second party. There is a complaint of noise and vibration of the industrial sewing machine next-door; but next-door there is no sewing machine. Or the neighbours may say: "We always try to be friendly, but she never responds"; or perhaps: "We think she's a bit crazy." Sometimes they say: "We're a large family, so we're bound to make a bit of noise, but we're not intending to disturb them." So the neighbours present themselves as being misrepresented and falsely accused.

iii) The Symmetrical Dispute. The antagonism is mutual, and feelings run high. For every complaint there is a counter-complaint. It is always the fault of the other. Often it seems to be an escalating conflict, with abuse, threats, solicitors' letters, and even physical violence.

Inevitably, the listener will be making provisional judgments about the reality of the complaint. Conciliators dealing with 'the invisible other' may be a little more sceptical - the woman who says she is being poisoned must surely be delusional - but mostly the initial stories sound very convincing. Listeners find themselves identifying strongly with the persecuted victim - almost becoming the dragon-killers they are asked to be. They expect to find the wicked neighbour sprouting horns and a tail. Their actual experience when they meet the wicked neighbour is usually very different: he may turn out to be 'the innocent other', denying all knowledge of causing any difficulty, in which case the conciliators may shift to identification with him. Or, in 'symmetrical disputes', the counter-accusations may sound even more convincing than the original complaint. Experience also suggests caution about the 'obvious' diagnosis of delusion: in one instance, it turned out that a man had actually climbed through the roof into his neighbour's loft and cut a water-pipe to cause a flood.

Despite this experience, conciliators find it difficult, if not impossible, to hold on to their scepticism. There seem to be sociological and psychological factors. The inner city generates a strong sense of social injustice: within it, many sub-groups and individuals are manifestly deprived; and it is a deprived sector of society as a whole. Volunteers, drawn from this community, therefore readily identify with stories of injustice and deprivation: their general experience tells them that these are all too likely to be true. There is plenty of evidence, for example, of racial harassment. Correspondingly, the complainants who approach the Project reflect the paranoid view of society that is fairly widespread in the inner city: they are particularly likely to feel that they are victims of persecution by society in general and, say, their neighbours in particular. What outsiders might see as neutral, non-threatening behaviour is not given the benefit of the doubt. Any inherent tendency to paranoia is easily magnified; almost any event is interpreted as confirming their worst fears; and so the stories they tell are powerfully convincing. Isolated happenings are woven into a coherent paranoid fantasy. The conciliator then is readily caught in the projective identification of the complainant: that is to say, the complainant's story creates a credible role of rescuer into which the conciliator is sucked.

Pushed and pulled in these ways, conciliators not unnaturally become preoccupied with trying to separate truth from fiction, fact from fantasy. They need to do this in order to hold on to their own detachment, even their own sanity. Is 'the innocent other' really so innocent? Or is it that, like the Queen in Hamlet, she protests too much? Has the neighbour really rebuilt the fence so that it encroaches inches into the complainant's garden? Is there a sewing machine? How much noise does it actually make? And so on.

It is sometimes tempting to go too far along this road. Conciliators are not surveyors, for example: if the shifting of the fence is at issue, the complainant can call in an expert to measure it. Or the environmental health professional can measure the noise made by the sewing machine next door. All too often, however, it turns out that these are not the 'real' problems. Whatever the measurements may say, the individual may still feel intruded upon. So when that issue is 'settled', another takes its place.

An alternative stance is to dwell less on the 'reality' question and to work with the underlying message, which, very often, basically runs something like this:- "I live in a dangerous and hostile world, and I feel isolated, powerless and frightened. I need someone trustworthy to listen to me and give me support." With 'the invisible other', where cross-checking the statements is difficult, it may be tempting to respond by taking up a counselling role. In some other cases too, where the complainant lives alone and the complaints seem far-fetched, conciliators may make a similar response.

Here it needs to be borne in mind that the approach has been made to a service advertised as being in the business of conflict and reconciliation. If it is only comfort and support that are wanted, why come to the Project rather than to other services? The starting assumption must be that there is a conflict that may have some reality, and also that there is at least some wish for a resolution. When an Asian family moved in next door and began extensive renovations, Mrs. X came to the office to complain that they had made the party wall thinner. It might have been tempting to diagnose paranoid delusions and refer her elsewhere. But this time the conciliators first checked the reality, which was that a new toilet had been installed next to the party wall, and because the family was large it was frequently being flushed. So the wall certainly seemed thinner. Mrs. X was persuaded to see for herself. The upshot was that the Asian family stopped using that toilet at night and early morning and also replumbed the cistern to reduce the noise of refilling; and the two households became friends. In one or two cases of 'the invisible other' conciliators have been able to help complainants to see more realistically how they might be contributing to the hostile behaviour they experience.

Conciliators are learning that although it is inappropriate to act as surveyors at one end of the spectrum or as therapists at the other, they have to discover in each new case what strategy is appropriate; and that may involve moving back and forth between these extremes.

An important focus of their work is the investment that one or both parties have in the dispute. It can be assumed that it must have a pay-off; otherwise it would not be sustained. It is this investment that so often makes the establishment of "the facts" an unproductive exercise. What would they do without the conflict that has become such a preoccupation for them? Losing a reliable enemy can be almost as devastating as losing a reliable friend. Often the person approaching the Project seems to be communicating something along these lines:- "I need this enemy as someone I can blame for all my troubles; on the other hand, things are getting out of hand and I want to stop."

Conciliators have learned to spot these projections. Sometimes it is the lonely individual; often it is a precarious family. The paranoid wife who feels persecuted by the neighbours and the husband who is caught between recognising that much of this is fantasy, but wanting to be loyal and avoid trouble. A childless wife who may become immensely preoccupied with the alleged wickednesses of the children next door, without recognising that this may be expressing her own envy and regret. A couple with a 20-year-old daughter who, to the outsider, is obviously disturbed, but this is something that they can't bear to acknowledge. In all these cases there are unvoiced feelings of recrimination which are then projected onto the neighbour in order to maintain a semblance of marital or family unity.

To spot the projections is one thing; to find a way of intervening is

something else. Conciliators have neither the mandate nor the competence to undertake the family therapy that often seems indicated; and indeed, at moments when they feel drawn to act in that kind of role they are losing their roles as conciliators. Recognition of these family dynamics is useful only if it prepares conciliators for the resistances they are likely to face in trying to reach a resolution. To prove that the fence has not been rebuilt in the wrong place will do no good at all. It is as if the conciliators are being asked to achieve two contradictory objectives: to make the conflict go away, and to maintain the enemy. Symmetrical conflicts, in which each of the parties, for their own survival, seem to need to maintain the other as an enemy, can seem to be especially intractable.

Mediation programmes in such cases attempt to achieve a mutual non-aggression pact: for example, A won't park his car in front of B's house if B's children stop kicking their ball into A's garden. In the Newham Project such an armed truce may be a useful first step, and at times it is all that can be achieved, but it is still a long way short of the ultimate goal of reconciliation. Conciliators are therefore engaged in an always long and sometimes fruitless process which involves separate discussions with each party and shuttle diplomacy.

In some of the symmetrical conflicts it turns out that the families have in the past been at least friendly and even intimate friends. Sometimes there is an overt explanation of the shift from intimate friendship to intimate enmity: the As and Bs went on holiday together and Mr. A was accused of flirting, or worse, with Mrs. B. In other cases the origins are obscure. Perhaps the Cs are having marital and financial problems, while the Ds are moving up in the world and making new relationships. In others again it is the husbands who are embattled; the wives seem less intolerant.

Whether or not there has been such a history, the task of the conciliators is to help them to begin to withdraw their irrational projections onto one another and to discover (or re-discover) what they might share in common - at a minimum their common humanity. It is the building of a shared boundary. The beginnings of that boundary arise from the presence - the persisting presence - of the conciliators themselves, which demonstrates a belief in the possibility that the relationship could shift. If nothing else, the warring parties share the experience of the third party.

Indeed, continuing to be there, and working to gain the trust of each party separately, may be as important as what the conciliators actually say. In one neighbour dispute, early in the Project, the two volunteers paid repeated visits without any apparent progress, and then learned that the two wives had first acknowledged each other in the street and then actually spoken on neutral topics over the garden fence. Lack of progress and the feeling of failure can tempt conciliators to take up the 'rescuer' role, by inventing and trying to impose a 'solution'. Usually that proves to be a mistake.

Even that, however, is not a general rule. One of the strengths of the Project is the variety of backgrounds of the volunteers. Not only does the pair of conciliators demonstrate that people from obviously contrasting backgrounds can work in harmony together, but they can make constructive use of their differences of cultural experience and also personality. In one instance, where an Asian female conciliator paired with a white male had made no progress with an Asian family, in which the spokesmen were men, she was able through talking to the woman of the family to find a basis for shifting. In another, a black female conciliator was able to be much more confronting

to a black woman than either a white or a male could have been. Such cultural identifications can be important. In a third, the Asian conciliator and an Asian 'disputant' came from very different cultures - Hindu and Muslim - but he also happened to be a doctor, and because of this he was sanctioned to take leadership towards change. (This was an 'innocent other' case and one of the few that have led to joint meetings of the two parties and full reconciliation.) It seems therefore that once there is a toe-hold - a hint that, amongst all the anger and aggression, one small part of the disputant would like to find a resolution - the tactics for exploiting it will, appropriately, vary greatly between conciliators and between situations. But all too often that toe-hold is non-existent or at least invisible.

Turning now from the predominantly neighbour disputes to organisational conflicts, there is much less experience to distil. As we saw earlier, some initial approaches came to nothing because the enquirer could not gain enough support from the organisation for using the Project. More could probably be done in working with such enquirers to sort out how they might get the necessary support.

Tentatively, we can identify two types of conflict at this level:-

- iv) Conflict within an Organisational Boundary. An example would be a split within the fairly large staff group - many part-time, some volunteers - in a youth club. A management committee may also be involved.
- v) Conflict across Organisational Boundaries. This kind of case is more diffuse and involves larger numbers. An example would be conflict involving the management committee of a community centre, some of its users (unruly young people) and residents in the neighbourhood.

Conciliators in the intra-organisational setting have the initial advantage of working with a set of people who, however divided, have a shared boundary - commitment to, say, providing a service for young people. It is this commitment that enables them at least to reach the point of an exploratory meeting, in which conciliators will have to overcome suspicions that they are aligned with one faction or the other. If they pass this test, the group-as-a-whole becomes the client. The word 'client' seems appropriate: in such settings the conciliators' role is more that of an organisational consultant. Whereas in a neighbour dispute they are aiming to help people live side by side, here their concern is to help people find a way of working together. Working together requires reaching agreement on what the task of the organisation is and how to carry it out. The constant focus has to be not the disputing factions but, to use the example given, the needs of the young people they are there to serve. Although the conciliators/consultants may feel under pressure to reach an integrative solution, agreement to differ might be quite a positive outcome - if, for example, it leads to formation of two youth clubs with different concepts and approaches.

Where the presenting problem is conflict that flows across organisational boundaries it is much more difficult to design an effective strategy of intervention. In the ordinary two-family dispute, it is hard enough to establish an entree into both households; in the complexities of an organisation's relationships with its environment, the boundaries of the disputants are much more diffuse. Although it would be attractive in principle to work with all the parties, in the kind of example quoted above 'users' and, still more, 'neighbours' are elusive, undefined categories with no clear boundaries: how then can one engage with them?

Probably the appropriate strategy is to treat this as an 'invisible other' situation and to try to enter into a consultancy contract with the management committee. The consulting task is then to help the committee anticipate the consequences of possible policies and actions that it might adopt in terms of their effects on the other groupings. Arising from this work it may become possible for the committee itself to arrange meetings with representatives of users and of neighbours. At this stage Project members might take on a second role as consultants/conciliators in the negotiation.

There are analogies here to a particular form of neighbourhood situation of which the Project has still too little experience but which may become more important. Tentatively one might call this 'The "Problem Family" and the Neighbours'. Two illustrations can be offered. In one, a woman in a West Indian family was complaining of harassment from a near neighbour, a young eastern European with a criminal record. After several visits to the complainant, it became clear that she was in difficulties with several other families, whom the conciliators then began to call on. (By this time the young man had been remanded in gaol on another charge.) It seemed increasingly probable that whilst the West Indian woman was behaving in ways that invited antagonism, which was something that the conciliators might be able to work at, she was also becoming a local scapegoat - everyone's enemy. At the time of writing the conciliators had still not found ways of tackling this other side of the equation. In the second example, the approach came from a family living in one of a small group of houses in a close. The complaint was that everyone in the close was being intimidated by a powerful, mafia-type household at the 'head' of the close. The conciliators had got as far as arranging a meeting of a number of the 'victims' when the alleged aggressor suddenly died and his family moved out - to everyone's relief. So that particular problem seemed to resolve itself, though it left some unanswered questions. For example, were there unstated and unresolved conflicts among the 'victim' households which they colluded in covering up by blaming all their problems on the one 'intimidator'?

That kind of question is relevant also to the apparently more contained 'symmetrical conflicts' between neighbours. It often emerges that other families in the locality get a lot of vicarious satisfaction out of watching the battle. Unconsciously at least it is as if they are egging it on. So long as the dispute is localised in these two families all the surrounding neighbours can be friendly. One suspects that if that conflict gets reconciled other squabbles will break out. In one case a black woman in dispute with new Asian neighbours was getting quite conscious support from a white family who resented the invasion of Asians in 'their' street. So far the Project has not found an effective strategy for working at these more diffuse conflicts. Although it may at one level seem simpler to concentrate attention on the principal actors it may well be that the immediate conflict continues to be intractable simply because the vicarious involvement of the surrounding neighbours is not being tackled.

#### Consultancy, Training and Support

Broadly speaking, consultancy to the Project has had two main strands. The first may be called 'institution-building'. This began in 1982 in helping the sponsors to shape the Project and continued throughout 1983 with the long process of local consultation and other preparation that

led up to the first residential event. The 'input' into that event was a set of individuals, many unknown to one another and varying widely in their backgrounds, experience and expectations. For the consultants, the primary task was to design and run an event that would produce as an 'output' a working group with a shared philosophy which was ready to start running the reconciliation service. That institution-building strand continued during the first year of operation through discussions within the regular meetings, and at times outside them with the Co-ordinator, on the overall strategy of the Project, on the transfer of authority from the two sponsors to the group as a whole, and on the development of the form of organisation. It became more prominent in the second residential event towards the end of 1984, and again in 1985, when new influxes of volunteers presented both an opportunity to review strategy and organisation and a need to re-engage in team-building.

The second strand of consultancy, and the one which has been more problematic, has been the task, both in the residential events and in the regular meetings, of helping the volunteers to prepare for their roles as conciliators and to learn from their experience.

Training - or the lack of it - has been an issue throughout the operating life of the Project. "Training in the necessary skills" was one of the resources that the sponsors were seeking when they first approached the Tavistock Institute. In those early days they were still thinking in terms of the North American models of mediation. For these, useful training packages exist. These assume, however, that the dispute has already reached a point where the two parties have agreed to meet in some place (usually the offices of the mediation service), either as a result of a court order or through the intervention of a third party. The latter is usually a local leader, though some mediation projects have their own 'case preparation' staff. (Such sparse and unreliable data as are available suggest that their success-rate in getting disputants to mediation is quite low - perhaps 25 per cent.) Therefore by whatever route the disputants have come to the point of mediation they have some readiness and commitment to reach a resolution. The Newham Project, however, chose the more ambitious and also more nebulous goal of reconciliation. What that would involve neither the sponsors nor the consultants could foresee, except in the most general terms. It might or might not include elements or phases of mediation along the way. Training is concerned with the development of skills. If the process of reconciliation was undefined, then the requisite skills were correspondingly undefinable. Moreover, North American mediation has for the most part been a middle-class activity, and has certainly been strongly influenced by middle-class professional values and approaches, derived from social work, counselling and also law. The Newham Project, on the other hand, was designed as a multi-class, multi-ethnic endeavour. It might ultimately turn out that the American methods had some relevance; but to impose them from the outset might destroy the creative potential of Newham's cultural mix.

For these reasons, the Tavistock consultants were resistant to the notion of training. From the first residential event onwards the emphasis was on helping and encouraging the members of the Project to use and learn from their own experience. Direct and personal understanding of processes of projection was likely to be important for conciliators, so the inter-group exercises were designed to give this experience. Role-playing of conflicts helped the volunteers to empathise and identify with the difficult and intransigent characters

they might be meeting. Along with that, they were encouraged to look beyond the spoken complaints and accusations and to think about what the underlying factors might be. (Thus the retired man who lived alone in a flat above an old people's day centre and complained of the smells of cooking might, it was suggested, be expressing loneliness and envy.) In this way, conciliators would be developing working hypotheses and testing them, modifying them and changing them in the course of their interventions. The notes in Appendix 1 on the first residential event reflect that way of working.

Nonetheless the volunteers, when they began to work on cases, felt inadequate. They demanded more training. In response, some periods in the fortnightly meetings were set aside for training activities. The main emphasis was on listening exercises: becoming more competent in interviews at hearing and reporting both the facts and also the underlying feelings. This seemed to be a relevant basic skill, which added a little to the confidence of the volunteers; but to go beyond that, it seemed, would risk undermining their capacity to draw on their own individual experience.

Case discussions, which often took up most of the meeting time, were an important source of support. In reporting their cases conciliators sometimes saw the conflicts in a slightly different light; and other members and the consultants could offer useful leads at times. But these discussions could also backfire by making the individual member feel inadequate for having missed the obvious; or the individual might accept and apply a suggestion too uncritically, with negative results. Sometimes a member went away at the end of a meeting more confused than helped.

So the demand for more training persisted. More skills would give them more confidence. Members half-believed that the consultants actually knew the answers, but were deliberately withholding them so as to force the conciliators to learn for themselves. If only the consultants would tell the conciliators what to do the conciliators would be able to tell their clients what to do: that seemed to be the implicit wish. No doubt this was preferable to acknowledging that the consultants together with the members were sailing in uncharted waters and equally struggling to learn along the way.

Fundamentally, the demand for training has been a plea for support. The role of conciliator is highly stressful. Listening to passionate and tearful stories of harassment and injustice; relating to people who are mentally disturbed; knocking on strange doors and not knowing what reception one will get - these are part of the working experience of, say, a social worker; but the volunteers do not have the professional training that provides the social workers with defences against the stress. Nor do they have the statutory and psychological protection of an 'official' role. While this is inherent in the nature of the Project, it does mean that the volunteers operate from much more tenuous external authority - that of the Project itself - and are thus more reliant than the professionals on using their own personal authority. (And sometimes, as we have seen they draw on the authority of being black or being a doctor.)

In addition to all this, they have to cope with the frequent experience of apparent or actual failure. Repeated sessions yield no progress. The complainant gives up conciliation and opts for litigation instead.

There is evidence that doggedly staying with the dispute in itself may prevent escalation and actually produce some movement; but the outward and visible signs of success are all too rare.

So there have been phases when individuals, and sometimes the Project as a whole, have felt demoralized. This was notable in the summer of 1985, when attendance at meetings sharply declined and some cases were being neglected. The picture was of individuals feeling isolated, carrying a burden of responsibility for which they lacked the resources, and being unsupported by colleagues and consultants. During and following the residential event in October 1985, however, this mood shifted. There was a tacit, if not explicit, recognition that dependency on consultants was misplaced and a firmer acknowledgement that the resources and the authority essentially lay in the volunteers themselves. Formation of area groups and a new management structure showed promise of a more robust and realistic system of mutual support.

### Intentions, Achievements and Problems

At the end of its first two years of operation, the Project corresponds in many respects to the founders' intentions. The volunteers recruited reflect much of the diversity of the local population. The volunteers have taken over management of the Project. The continuing flow of referrals - as many as the members can respond to - indicates that the reconciliation service certainly responds to a felt need and probably has a positive reputation in many sectors of the borough. Educational activities, though so far limited, are being developed.

The model of a diverse group of local volunteers getting together to tackle local conflict is in itself a significant demonstration of collective action in face of the racial tension and sense of powerlessness that are so typical of inner city areas.

Individual volunteers also exercise indirect influences in the community. A number have reported that experience gained from the Project has affected them in their other roles, at work and in community groups: they listen more carefully; they are more alert to underlying reasons for conflict; they are less likely to get caught up in irrational splitting; they have gained in personal confidence.

The national and international interest that the Project has attracted suggests that it is a timely and appropriate innovation: it feels right.

There are, however, problems. One is financial: by the end of the second year enough short-term funding had been acquired to pay for a full-time Co-ordinator, a part-time administrative assistant, and a second part-time person who would be working mainly with Asian communities; but so far there are no signs of more permanent funding. Secondly, there is the internal problem of securing the commitment and involvement of enough volunteers even to cover the existing work-load, let alone achieve the expansion that had been hoped for and seems to be needed. Although second and third waves of volunteers came in 1984 and 1985, the number able and willing at any one time to work on cases has remained relatively small and static. A few have resigned, either because they have moved out of the borough or because they have decided

that the work is not for them. Some have explicitly taken time out during periods of exceptional work or domestic pressures. Many others remain on the books, but rarely attend meetings, and when asked to take on a case they are "too tied up at the moment"; or they fail to follow a case through and have to be prodded to make visits. In fact, each member has signed a contract, which defines the objective to make time available, but the Project is understandably reluctant to try to enforce it, since that might mean the loss of more volunteers.

This second problem has to reach some resolution. To tackle it, it is not helpful to blame the individual volunteers for lack of commitment. More productive is to postulate that in reducing their involvement they are behaving rationally: their non-availability indicates that any satisfactions they may have hoped for when they enlisted have turned out to be either absent or outweighed by the penalties. Their other activities - which for many of them include other voluntary work - are evidently more attractive. As we have seen, they are telling us that they would be more committed to the Project if they had more experience of success, and that for this to happen they need more training. This suggests that we should look again at the definition of the task itself and at the ways in which the volunteers are helped to perform it.

Is the task impossible? Reconciliation is a worthy objective - who can deny it? - but rarely is it fully achieved. Should the Project abandon the reconciliation service and concentrate instead on education? But it is doubtful whether education about conflict would have much credibility if it were not based on the experience of practice. Should the Project fall back on the more familiar pattern of mediation? This would increase the likelihood of 'success' because it would mean taking on only those cases in which both parties were prepared at least to meet. However, it would also remove the distinctive focus of the Project and indeed its shared ideology, which involves the belief - almost the faith - that the differences that lead to conflict can be turned to constructive and creative ends. Can referrals be more effectively screened, so that those taken on by the Project have a greater chance of a successful outcome? This is a possibility that deserves further exploration. Some of the 'Invisible Other' enquiries, for example, would be appropriately handed over to other agencies at an early stage. Some mediation schemes carry out a preliminary phase of 'case preparation'. In the Newham Project, paid staff and/or a few volunteers might specialise in this task, which would involve further testing of whether there is a basis for intervention and, if so, preparing the ground for the conciliators to move in. These would then be starting from fuller brief, possibly including provisional hypotheses and suggestions about strategy.

Steps in that direction could make the task of the conciliators less daunting, but their recurrent demand for more training - though in part it is an expression of lack of confidence - needs also to be taken at face-value. Experience of other agencies, such as the Community Boards in California, suggests that the offer of a formal training programme itself attracts volunteers: they see it as giving them a qualification which could also be relevant in other settings. In Britain, the Samaritans have a rigorous programme of induction, initial training and ongoing supervision. In some ways the content of such programmes is less important than the process. Completion of the training and becoming an accredited member of the organisation gives the individual a sense of self-confidence. The Newham Project, as we have seen, has

avoided selection and rejection; but unless the possibility of rejection is real, members are likely to continue to have doubts about their competence. The fiction that everyone is equally competent denies obvious differences and can in itself be demoralising.

This is a hurdle that the Project probably has to cross. Although care has to be taken to avoid teaching a standardized approach to conciliation and to help individuals to use their differences constructively, enough experience on cases has been accumulated to design a more structured training programme. Graduates from it would be paired for their first two or three cases with experienced conciliators, who would have a more formally recognised supervisory role. Only after this probation period would the recruit be accepted formally as a conciliator.

Up to now, the reconciliation service has been the central focus of the Project and education has been a marginal extra. This may be an area in which some of the volunteers who feel uncomfortable in the role of conciliator could have a contribution to make. They need to be enabled to do so, however, without feeling that they are second-class citizens. So the time seems ripe to develop the educational arm of the Project as a significant activity in its own right alongside the conciliation service. If the Project is to fulfil its original objectives of promoting understanding of conflict and change in Newham, there is enormous scope here for innovation. At one end of the spectrum, there is the challenge of helping primary school children to learn about processes of splitting and projection. At the other, there is the need to involve adults in a deeper analysis of "what's going on in Newham". And much in between.

To sum up:- The achievement is substantial. The volunteers, having underestimated the difficulties of what they were taking on, may correspondingly undervalue what they have achieved. Problems remain: funding is insecure; the morale and commitment of volunteers are at times fragile and need consolidation. However, the evidence of this experiment so far indicates that the Newham Project has the potential to go much further, and it confirms that the model can be adopted and adapted in other projects.

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## APPENDIX 1

### November 1984 Training Event

Summary prepared by Co-ordinator, December 15, 1984

18 volunteers attended for 4 days.

The training programme aimed to develop our own understanding of conflict and co-operation in the community; and to develop an approach to conciliation that is practical and relevant to Newham.

This summary represents some of the things we came up with:

There are many sides to every conflict. Although specific problems may need to be solved, these may be just the symptoms of the need for more long-term change. The aim of these changes is RE-CONCILIATION.

Re-conciliation means that people are enabled to accept differences without fear;

- They are enabled to find a common framework or boundary;
- The antagonism between parties is reduced; this may or may not lead to friendship.

In the process of conciliation, one might need to address the particular conflict that has brought the underlying difficulties to the surface. This we called mediation.

- it is more like first-aid, or patching-up, so a relationship can be sustained and opened up to conciliation.
- a confrontation may create conditions in which change is possible. Mediation might be one way of taking advantage of this.
- it may provide an opportunity for the parties to listen and understand each other.
- a successful mediation may make the process of conciliation more credible.
- mediation is about finding a solution to a particular problem. This could act as an incentive for people to enter a dialogue.
- mediation might act as a demonstration of potency. People who arrive at a solution to a particular problem are likely to feel they have the capacity to make more changes in their lives. This could be very important for conciliation to happen, as people need to feel they can influence their own situation.
- mediation might involve using our influences to 'fix' things, so people's lives become less pressurised and a relationship can develop.

The process of conciliation might also involve meetings between the conciliators and the parties concerned.

- These may be separate or all together.
- Hold meetings on neutral ground.
- They should give the parties an opportunity to express their view of the situation.
- It may be best to talk to one party at a time.
- The parties in conflict may need separate waiting rooms.
- Need some form of introduction.
- Remember the reason for the meeting.
- Avoid face-to-face arrangement of chairs.
- Stress the confidentiality of the meeting.
- Allow all parties an equal amount of uninterrupted time to state their case.
- Allow complaints to be made at length. People may feel deterred by the apparent enormity of the situation.
- Use the meetings to look for creative solutions; not to re-iterate the problem.
- Allow the angriest party to speak first.
- Allow enough time to consult with co-workers.
- Don't try to move too fast to a solution.
- Encourage interaction between the parties.
- Diversionary tactics may be helpful; a cup of tea, or illustration.
- If you can't agree on anything else, agree to adjourn.
- Leave the door open for subsequent meetings.
- Remember, both sides are right to an extent.

The role of the conciliator:

- make introductions.
- be seen to be impartial.
- listen.
- be a buffer. May need to absorb or represent the party's anger.
- give rules and guidelines. Not solutions.
- get basic information.

- be aware of underlying and background issues.
- don't project your own values and prejudices onto people.
- ease people into a relationship. Phrase questions in order to elicit a response.
- don't assume too much (except the rightness of all parties).
- presence may help to calm the parties. Set an example.
- agree with co-worker on strategy before meetings.
- explore options: "What if....."
- draw on people's own experience.
- be careful not to threaten either party. Is your race/sex/class threatening?
- how can you deal with anger; both your own and others'?
- research: who is involved?
  - does anyone need expert advice?
  - what is the situation from their point of view?
  - what are their hopes and fears?
- don't panic; no situation is hopeless.
- be like an invisible telephone line.
- refer to .....

The whole group of members. This can help conciliators (and the process of conciliation) to:

- learn to live with feelings of helplessness.
- talk through emotions.
- know our own prejudices.
- form working partnerships, Small groups and networks.
- use own skills.
- reflect on situations.
- analysis.
- taking sides to represent forces in a conflict may help analyse it.
- brainstorm a problem.
- write up the case.
- give authority to individual conciliators.

- allow each to have confidence in their own decisions.
- confidentiality: conciliator; meetings; client; group.
- variety of people provides a variety of possible strategies, influences and contacts.
- maintain our 'training space'.
- consultancy.
- be aware of roles in groups, who assumes, who assigns?
- keep some initiative.

The criteria of the Project's work, therefore, will be those of reconciliation.

- we deal with people, not just problems.
- we may not appear to succeed; there are different views of success, and changed relationships may lead to changed goals.
- to enable people to make changes themselves.
- to arrive at a practical situation that;
  - 1) allows for differences within the unity of a relationship;
  - 2) sustains a unity of community amid the contributions and roles of diverse parties.

N.B. This summary is not a complete statement. Please amend it or rearrange it as necessary.

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After war service in India and Burma in the Royal Indian Artillery he returned to Cambridge to read anthropology. His doctorate was based on two years' field research in South India, and this was followed by a further one and a half years' fieldwork in Northern Thailand. He then spent five years as an internal consultant in two companies in the textile industry in the United States and India.

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