

FORWARD

EDITORIAL

Insights from the frontline

This, the first Community Relations Trainers Journal to be published, almost three years into the existence of the Community Relations Council, explores the themes adopted by six community relations training practitioners. Recurring in the quite unique perspectives represented is an acknowledgement that fear, and resulting silences, paralyse and that action can be regenerated when energy is released - particularly if that energy sources the deep personal and group hurts and trauma which twenty-four years of unbroken, violent, political conflict have guaranteed Northern Ireland communities.

Jerry Tyrrell and Michael Doherty allude to essential support and supervision that community relations workers must see to if burn-out and ill health are to be avoided. Roisin McGlone gives a glimpse of Belfast City Council's recently appointed community relations officer team and their sense of collective vision. Her pithy final comment offers a resounding endorsement to interpersonal and Community Relations work. Colin Neilands tracks the mammoth task upon which WEA and local council community relations officers have collaborated in organising more than sixty community relations training workshops for over 700 trainees in 1992.

Anne Dickson develops, from her considerable experience of community relations work in the youth sector, a six step, incremental group empowerment process moving from guidance for leadership preparation, single-identity work, through to specialised justice-based and historical issues work, culminating in community involvement and empowerment.

The final article in this epistle gives expression to the seminal rejuvenative work accomplished by David McKittrick and PACE. David's account of the trials of risk-taking for community relations group work facilitators makes a humane and reflective account of his practice, and exposes his courage to report on failure, doubts and challenges in the work.

David concludes with a theme which will receive further scrutiny in subsequent editions of this journal ie. the critique offered community relations work by those groups in search of a more just, equitable and less violent society. The latter emphasise the political, historical and institutional structures which enshrine both cause and effect in the living tragedy of Northern Ireland's constitutional crisis. The artificial splitting of the forces mustered to challenge, confront and transcend sectarianism requires consideration. Where does community relations work end and political activism begin? Can one be anti-sectarian *vis-à-vis* attitudes and behaviour whilst being oblivious to the institutions, legislation and power strata which nourish and sustain sectarianism? Issues to fuel future editions.

The Journal aims to be a non-prescriptive synthesis of current issues in community relations training and a vehicle to support the development of diversity in community relations practice.

The views here relayed are those of the contributors and will hopefully be of assistance to community relations practitioners and trainers in sustaining their energy for the long haul.

● Jerry Tyrrell, Director, Quaker Peace Education Project

Supervision and support

I started work with the Ulster Quaker Peace Education Project in April 1988, and within a month I had recruited a group of volunteers that subsequently became the Quaker Peace Education Project or QPEP team. This group, with a changing membership, has met regularly on Tuesday mornings.

The QPEP team has gone on to lead several hundred workshops throughout Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic, Britain and individual members have worked in the USSR, Uganda and the USA.

This is not the occasion to dwell on the general area of working with volunteers, but I think it is worth dwelling on the specialised area of team-work in a community relations context.

Ultimately support and supervision is about empowerment; this buzz word for me means developing leadership and, in the process, overcoming isolation and competition and preventing burn-out.

We work as a team not because we are co-dependent, but because it allows space and time for creativity to develop. How many of you co-lead, how many of us work on the assumption that the person we would dearly love to lead with, would love to lead with us?

I'm conscious that I am in a privileged position; I have a salary that I don't have to raise and which isn't dependant on the number of workshops I lead, and I work for an action research project which has embraced this particular process. I'm not financially dependant on the income I get from paid workshops and can therefore afford to be magnanimous.

If you are serious about gathering together a support group, you have to create a space where it is safe for people to make mistakes, to share difficulties and successes, and ultimately to be prepared to encourage people to be even better leaders than you! The role of assistant leader is vital and you can do a lot to encourage competence and confidence in another person by taking on such a role and letting go.

It is a way to encourage leadership in oppressed or minority groups as an ally. How many of you have difficulty in getting volunteers to come up to take part in an exercise in front of the group? How many of you have ever been treated with less than 100% respect in front of a group, eg. brought up and humiliated in front of a class?

This is what we are up against when encouraging leadership amongst groups, except those who were conditioned that they were born to lead - and they got confused because they were brutalised in the process.

So, clearly there is a disincentive for people to lead, and this is reinforced in a culture like Northern Ireland, where people have negative examples of leaders, who are put-down, hounded, shot, etc.

So, how to encourage leadership? In practical terms this means practising what you preach. From the outset QPEP have developed ground-rules such as: no put-downs; confidentiality; you may pass; look for and affirm positive qualities in one another; one person speaking at a time; and volunteer yourself only. The QPEP team is expected to model these and inevitably they increase confidence.

Affirmation is a powerful tool, and can turn dark despair into a bright future; so instead of ignoring mistakes we are able to learn from them. Encouraging people to lead and take calculated risks, not to shirk from practising in advance, to use a ratio of 90% affirmation to 10% criticism.

If we are affirmed sufficiently it becomes safe enough for us to want to hear improvements. We need to make mistakes, and to heal ourselves.

The pursuit of excellence creates its own momentum, the initiative for detailed planning, evaluation and writing up has come from the volunteers.

Finally, you have to be prepared for the fact that leadership skills are marketable, and soon you will be needing to recruit a new team!

6th July 1992 at Ulster People's College, Belfast

● Michael Doherty, Youth Action North West

Supporting yourself in CR work

The aim of this article is to offer some ideas on building your own support for Facilitators/Tutors who are involved in Cross Community Work.

1. Management Structures in Organisations

It is important to understand the type of management structure that your organisation has, and where you are placed within this structure. You also need to be clear on who controls the budgets and who decides the programmes. Is it you, the Line Manager, or Management Committee, or all of you? Are the people involved with your project committed to what you are doing? What is the relevant training experience of your management committee in cross community work? Are you happy with the decision-making process?

2. Setting Up An Advisory Group to Yourself and the Project

This group should be local people who you respect at a personal level and are also aware of the type of work that you are doing. They are not a Management Committee and their role is to advise and support you. It is also essential that you meet on a regular basis and you can contact key people in this group that you can easily relate to. These people should be there not only to give you support but also to give you constructive criticism as well.

3. Self Support

This section is compiled under two headings:

(a) Family

The most important advice to anybody is to take time off and don't take your work home with you. Plan your residential well in advance and learn to say no. Be very clear with your partner that unsociable hours are an essential part of your work.

(b) Facilitating a Group

Do not start any group without setting down a contract. This should cover confidentiality; taking responsibility for yourself; the importance of being honest; trust; punctuality; smoking arrangements (where applicable); and drink (see below). The group should also be given a

chance to add their own parts to the contract.

There is a debate around as to whether or not a facilitator can be neutral. I follow a school of thought that supports being honest. Let people know who you are, where you are from, background and religion (if any). If we are about getting people to appreciate each others background, heritage etc., why deny your own?

- In order to gain confidence in facilitating you need to practice leading cross community groups.
- Use all sorts of aids, handouts, overheads, exercises etc., a word of warning though, only use material that you are comfortable with.
- If you are unsure about the aims and objectives of a particular exercise do not do it. You need to understand what the outcome of a particular exercise may be.
- Practice with your advisory group and other individuals who you know have carried out a particular exercise. Always seek advice if unsure.
- You also need to get the support of the group that you are working with. Do not rush into any sensitive issues until you have created a 'safe environment' that allows people to express themselves openly.
- Whenever possible use co-tutors. It is easier working with a group when there are two facilitators. This needs extra care and attention because it has to be team work. You have to be 'in tune' with each other.
- Work out beforehand who is doing what and try not to be in conflict with each other during a session.
- It is also advisable (but not always possible) to have co-tutors who are of a different religion and different sex.
- When co-tutoring it is nice to appraise each other after a session but it is essential that you also hear what has not gone so well.
- There may be a problem with alcohol. My advice

is that if a group is under eighteen, ban it completely. If it is an adult group, do not allow any alcoholic drink during sessions. If the venue is 'board premises' then respect the rules that state 'no alcohol at all'. Places like Conrymeela, Ballycastle have a 'No Alcohol' policy. Let your group know this beforehand. The work is difficult enough without adding to it.

- Lastly, only do what you are capable of. Because a particular workshop works for one group leader does not mean it will work for you.

4. Influential People

Guide-lines for cross community workers are being drawn up by Ann Dickson and myself and will be available soon.

Ann is now working as a Training Officer with the YMCA and she has been a great source of support to me over the last four years. Other people have also been influential in helping shape my style of leadership. People like Mari Fitzduff, Director of the Community Relations Council; Cheri Brown, Director of the National Coalition Building, Boston USA, who has developed a Prejudice Reduction workshop model, Dr Frank Wright, Historian, now at Limerick University, and Lou Tice, Pacific Institute who developed a programme called 'Investment and Excellence' and said that 'Everyone has unending potential to be better'.

Northern Ireland has potential to be a better place to live in as well because of the numbers now involved with community relations work. We all need the support of each other to do the work. Most of all, though, we need to support ourselves.

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- **Roisin McGlone**, CR Training Officer, Belfast City Council

First impressions

Over the last twenty years in Northern Ireland there have been many periods of despair and despondency for the whole community. There have also been many gratifying endeavours to promote reconciliation, reduce prejudice, combat sectarianism and promote mutual understanding through social, economic and political means.

There is never a time more suitable than the present for the welcoming of new and fresh incentives. Belfast City Council on 18 November 1991 approved a Community Relations Programme for the Council's Community Services Department. In April 1992 a major part of the programme, the appointment of three community relations officers was completed. In a divergence from previous appointments in District Councils, the three community relations officers have very specific designations. Ms Birgitte Qvist has the responsibility for women's issues, Ms Grainne McKenna is responsible for projects and I have specific responsibility for training and support.

The employment of staff under the Community Relations Programme to promote improvement of community relations is a major and welcome step and the distinct post for training and support for me is both challenging and exciting.

The initial identification of posts and responsibility to achieve the aims of the programme came from a working group within the Community Services Department, primarily comprised of community services officers but

with representation from neighbourhood community workers in 1990.

The main responsibilities for the posts were to include: developing a programme of training for staff in the Community Services Department, provision of training to voluntary community groups, development of mechanisms to facilitate co-operative action in local community areas on an on-going basis, preparation of information and resource material and identifying literature and research to facilitate community groups in the examination of the cause and nature of conflict and the options available by way of response. Since then, the general responsibilities have in the main been adhered to; areas of work have been redefined; and developed and resource packs and records of good community relations practice have been developed for departmental and wider circulation.

Providing opportunities for training in community relations, both for field staff in the department and to voluntary community groups, is in itself a boundless undertaking; to examine attitudes, values and beliefs; to understand and manage conflict; to facilitate co-operative action whilst continually aspiring to the ultimate objectives of increased tolerance and mutual understanding; securing a greater degree of cross community contact and promoting greater acceptance and respect of different cultural traditions.

The personal is political for us now more than ever.

● Colin Neilands - Interface Organiser, WEA

Report on the initial stage of the partnership between WEA & CRO's

The Development of *Interface*

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is, according to its constitution, a non-sectarian and non-party political organisation. Some years ago the Northern Ireland district of the Association began to question whether it was enough to meet that requirement or whether it should take a more pro-active stance and become directly and forcefully anti-sectarian.

There followed both an internal review of WEA(NI)'s attitudes, policies and practices, and some research into the probable demand for anti-sectarian training and educational programmes.

Following on from this internal debate there came a period of negotiation with the Department of Education (DENI) for funding to appoint two workers in the Cultural Traditions fields to instigate and develop contrasting programmes over a three year period.

The first of these was in People's History - Tutor/Organiser appointed, Jack Johnston (commencing January 1991), and the second in Anti-sectarian Education - Tutor/Organiser appointed, Colin Neilands (commencing April 1991).

The anti-sectarian project, which has subsequently been christened '*Interface*', was originally formulated to work with organisations in the voluntary and community sector and with trade unions in a consultative and provisory manner to help them develop anti-sectarian policies and practices specific to their particular circumstances (with the creation of *Counteract*, the ICIU's anti-intimidation unit, trade unions are no longer seen as a primary target group).

While this remains a central concern of the project, the level of interest or readiness for such development in this sector was greatly overestimated and it quickly became clear that there was a need for a greater awareness of and confidence in community relations work generally, and anti-sectarian work in particular, before there would be much pick up on this offer.

Provision of training and development opportunities for the voluntary/community sector had been a primary concern of the Community Relations Council. However, in November 1991, CRC offered me the chance to develop training provision outside of Belfast, perhaps working in

conjunction with the Community Relations Officers appointed by local district councils.

Development of the Co-operative WEA/CRO Model

The provision of community relations 'taster' training days had to this point been centred in Belfast and, to a lesser extent, Derry and it was therefore generally perceived to be important to reach out to other parts of Northern Ireland to meet the needs of those unable to travel to either of these centres.

Such days have many purposes - stripping away the mystique from community relations, grounding such work in local communities, empowering community activists, stimulating discussion, etc. Because of this some would see them as risky, even feeling that they might upset the 'good community relations' in their area. This meant that it was unlikely, because of their working circumstances, or personal conceptions of their remit, or newness in post, that all CROs would be willing to take a shot in the dark with such provision.

There was also quite a bit of anxiety over generating interest - the feeling being that the cities might be able to attract numbers to such events, but in our part of the world ...

On the positive side, it would mean that the CROs were engaging with the sharper end of community relations work, while at the same time creating opportunities for widening their networking and deepening existing contacts. For myself and the *Interface* project, it would provide important opportunities to raise the profile of the project and the WEA's commitment to community relations through educational and training provision, and also allow seeds to be sown whereby future work along the originally conceived plan could develop. In addition, creating a series of community relations workshops meant that direct anti-sectarian training could be included in a context which might be less threatening.

The CRO for Down District Council, Damien Brannigan, had already expressed interest in providing community relations training opportunities in his area and when approached was keen to sign up for an initial series of four workshops. Having approached a couple of CROs in the SELB area, I was then able to arrange a meeting with all CROs in the area with the result that two programmes of workshops were organised, one in each half of the Board area - Armagh and Dungannon districts forming one

programme, and Craigavon, Banbridge, and Newry and Mourne districts forming the second - with workshops alternating between areas in each grouping. The variety of workshops followed the range already established through the CRC programmes in Belfast and Derry.

The breakdown in responsibilities and costs emerged as follows. The CROs took responsibility for advertising and promoting the events within their districts, and met the costs of venue hire and providing lunch for the participants. The *Interface* project co-ordinated the facilitators and met their fees and costs. The workshops were offered free since as mentioned above, none of the parties involved were sure of the likely response and wished to avoid the possibility of discouraging participation with even a minimum fee.

The publicity took a number of forms. CROs in some areas produced leaflets advertising the workshops and including a registration form. Most made use of local papers with photos and descriptive articles, both to launch the series and to advertise the next events regularly. However, much of the success in attracting participants lay with individual contacts and personal powers of persuasion.

The following statistics show the total numbers serviced by the programmes and a breakdown of these figures according to gender and religious background.

Number of workshops	23
Number registered	327
Average number per workshop	14
Gender breakdown	150 men (46%) 177 women (54%)
Number of returned evaluation forms	281 (86% return)
Religious background breakdown	104 Protestants (37%) 139 Catholics (49.5%) 19 Others (7%) 18 No Reply (6.5%)

Optimal numbers for community relations workshops seems to be thirteen people.

The Protestant/Catholic breakdown will surprise no-one active in community centred work where there has traditionally been a higher proportion of Catholics involved. However, it is interesting to note that the

figures are much closer than my own impressionistic estimates. Not surprisingly within individual workshops in different areas the imbalance was often much more pronounced and the vulnerability (or perceived vulnerability) of the Protestant minorities was often a key issue for groups.

Evaluation

The extremely positive feedback has been encouraging to us all and it was wonderful to see how some people who came through a whole series grew in confidence, self and community awareness and enthusiasm. The following quote from an evaluation form is not untypical - "The facilitators were excellent overall on all the workshops. I was surprised at how much I learned in connection with myself. Thank you."

For the Future

A number of learning points emerge from the project so far which should be taken into account for the next stage in the relationship.

A set of clear guide-lines, negotiated and agreed by CROs, (these are now available from the WEA) facilitators, and myself should help to iron out difficulties and confusions. This will cover areas such as ensuring the advance publicity accurately reflects workshop content, that the room is set up ready for the facilitator, that a two-day workshop requires commitment to both days, and that participants have registered in advance so that facilitators can be told a few days before the workshop how many to expect and prepare for.

For those workshops at which I was present or facilitating, I always offered to have flipchart sheets typed up and sent to participants. This seemed to be appreciated and should probably be made as a general offer at all workshops.

Quite often there was a discrepancy between the number of people supposedly registered for a workshop and the number who actually turned up. While some disparity is always likely, advance registration, reinforced by a fee, might make people more conscious of making a commitment.

A new feature of future workshops will be the introduction of a participant fee of £5 per head per day. This is in line with charges for similar events organised by NICVA and CRC. It is hoped that a fee will encourage individuals and groups to take enrolment more seriously and to make a real commitment to the workshops in which they express interest. It also allows for the expansion of the programme through recouping some of the costs to meet the growing demands, and means that facilitators will receive a more realistic fee for their services.

The combined series hosted by Craigavon, Banbridge,

and Newry and Mourne CROs, showed how reluctant people are to travel any distance, even 10-12 miles, to attend an event. This has been taken into account in planning for the autumn, with each council area having its own mini series but advertising what is on in neighbouring areas for those who want to/are able to travel.

A mechanism needs to be introduced whereby the facilitators can receive support, evaluate their performances, and feedback their experiences to both the CROs and the WEA. This will also give an opportunity to check out the agreed procedural guide-lines.

The highly successful series run in the Dungannon/

Amagh area earlier this year has raised the question of what can individuals do who have gone through such a series and are still eager for more? This particular group are eager to stay together and will be seeking training specific to their own needs and desires. The formation of similar groups will depend on the continuity of attendance at workshop series, allowing for a sense of group to evolve.

Looking to the immediate future the programme for the autumn of 1992 will be greatly expanded, in that Fermanagh, Omagh/Strabane, Derry and Newtownabbey councils should be swelling the ranks, while some of the previously participating councils will be expanding their individual programmes.

January to June 1992

CR trainers' network dates

Wednesday, 24 February '93 - Ulster Peoples College

Friday, 21 May '93 - Belfast Castle

Friday, 24 September '93 - *To be confirmed*

Monday, 29 November '93 - *To be confirmed*

(Dates and venues for community relations training for trainers will be available with the February 1993 edition of Community Relations Journal)

Should you wish to contribute with reflections on any of the issues raised in this first edition of the Community Relations Trainers Journal or submit an article documenting insights to your community relations practice, please submit to the Community Relations Council Training Support Officer as soon as possible.

It is anticipated that the Journal will go to print one week before the subsequent community relations trainers' network meeting. A copy must be with the Community Relations Council by the end of the preceding month ie. 31 January, 3 April, 31 August and 30 September.

● Ann Dickson, National Council of YMCAs

A progressive approach to cross community group work with youth leaders

It seems a lot of Youth Leaders are getting involved in cross community activities. Sometimes this involves the leader ringing up the neighbouring club 'from the other side' and organising a football match or other activity. Sometimes leaders realise that for positive attitude change to occur, at least if it has a hope of occurring, planning a cross community programme needs to involve discussion of sensitive issues connected the 'Troubles' and a real exchange of experiences, feelings, sharing of memories and beliefs.

What follows outlines areas of group work connected to leadership, planning sessions, single identity group work, and suggest group work issues for basic cross community groups. Ideas for discussion topics are listed, but specific exercises, games, icebreakers, ways of tackling certain issues are not outlined. Details of games and exercises can be found in groupwork hand-books. The idea of this outline is to encourage leaders to see that preparation work is necessary and that there can be more to cross community group work than basic contact sessions with people from two traditions.

Many leaders of cross community groups also realise that if they are dealing with sensitive issues in the group discussion, then it is important that the leadership team have prepared themselves for dealing with raw feelings, hurts and prejudices. Perhaps the first thing that the leaders should do is to explore their own painful memories, sensitive issues, beliefs and fears. When the leaders feel secure and confident dealing with 'raw feelings' of their own, and have a good trusting relationship as a team, then facilitating a cross community discussion with the group is much easier.

It is often a good idea to build up confidence in discussing sensitive issues with each single-identity group (people from one religious/cultural background) before joining the two groups together. When individuals feel threatened or defensive about their own identity they are more likely to withdraw from honest communication by being 'polite', or there is a real chance of an emotional outburst which sometimes can be destructive to the group process. During single identity discussions, the group are free to explore positive and negative aspects of their identity, and individuals are encouraged to explore differences of opinion, and break away from a defensive 'herd mentality'. After this experience, the group usually feels more confident in expressing their true opinions and will even be willing to meet the other group's views with a freer attitude.

"What do we do after the sixth residential?", or a similar question, is often heard from a weary leader. Hopefully, cross community group work will not only encourage personal development, but will encourage individuals to initiate local community action, be more politically empowered and perhaps join groups that are working for local or structural change for peace and justice. We are encouraging ourselves and others to walk away from our tendencies of violence and apathy, and towards empowerment.

What do you mean "Leaders talking about their experiences"?

What do we do now after the sixth residential?

Cross community work? Oh, we've done that!

Often, somewhere along the way, and it cannot be presumed upon or planned happen 'after step 4', people form friendships and change their attitudes, from their positive contact with someone from another tradition or background. Let us not forget, despite the mentioning of methods, stages and exercises, that perhaps the most important factor in our own personal development, is the power of meaningful relationships. Therefore, I have included this special happening in the programme outline. It is not a 'step' and relationships can form at any point of the programme. However, often when individuals have honestly expressed their differences and have heard each other's experiences, and when there is not a sense of false politeness to avoid tension, real allies are found and offer strength and support. Without these relationships, it is easy for people to return to their 'ghetto mentality', especially if their community is feeling attacked or under threat. These relationships often prove to be a motivating factor for individuals staying committed to peace and justice work.

After a basic discussion programme, the group may be particularly interested in certain peace and justice issues. Some of the group might want to delve deeper into historical and political issues, invite input speakers or

organise conferences or seminars on certain issues. They might wish to deal better with their own feelings of bitterness. At times they may feel that they cannot cope with their own reaction to bigoted remarks. There are many different avenues to explore that can be found under the umbrella of cross community group work. Step 5 outlines some of these areas, but there are many more!

Step 6 outlines some areas of group work discussion that may encourage local community development or empowerment. This community involvement is perhaps ideal; the people we have facilitated are now actively involved in groups that promote non-violence, peace initiatives, justice and rights issues, community development associations etc. Individuals may be facilitating cross community programmes themselves!

For real, sustainable peace, and not just a cessation of violence or a fickle cease-fire, we need to increase trust and understanding between the two religious traditions and increase real communication to reduce our prejudice, fears and myths.

However, structural change is also necessary. People need to be involved in local politics, support law and order in a constructive way and encourage community developments.

I hope this outline provides some vision for possibilities for cross community group work for your group. Of course, as leaders of group work sessions we need to adapt programmes to the specific needs of our groups. We are always learning about ourselves, about others and about ways of facilitating cross community group work - hopefully we are learning together.

Steps towards Cross Community Empowerment

1. Leader Team Preparation

Expectations.
Motives.
Fears regarding the cross community programme.
Reasons for planning a cross community programme.
Getting to know each other sessions.
Contract.
Ideas for the type of programme to encourage.
Sharing own experiences of the 'Troubles'.
Information sessions for leaders according to interest.
Discussion of sensitive issues - hurts, views on politics, religion, law and order etc.
Practical planning sessions: Transports, funding, venues etc.

2. Single Identity Group Work

Listening skills.
Contract for discussion sessions.
Increasing confidence to discuss sensitive issues.
Encouraging confidence in one's own tradition/culture.
Dealing with embarrassment of own cultural history.

Questions we want to ask each other re. the Troubles.
Information sessions according to group's interest.
Increasing curiosity about other side's views.
Increasing security about being challenged on own identity.
Stereotyping exercises.

3. Basic Cross Community Work

Trust-building exercises.
Getting to know you type exercises.
Contract. Explanation/consensus on programme plans.
Expectations and fears.
Stereotyping exercises.
Similarities and differences of how groups see themselves and other groups.
Questions we want to ask each other.
Listening to each other's experiences and finding 'allies'.

4. 'Establishing Allies from the Other Tradition'

Although this 'step' cannot be presumed on, the above group work sessions encourage the friendships to develop. Genuine, meaningful relationships are formed. Real 'allies', friends from the other tradition, are found. Relationships that bridge sectarianism. When attacks are felt against own community, these real friendships discourage a defensive 'ghetto mentality'. The relationships may prove to be a motivating factor for individuals to be committed to other peace-work or community action.

5 Specialised Issues

For example: 'How to Cope with Conflict' programme.
Dealing with slurs, bigotry and sectarian remarks/actions.
Justice and Rights issues.
Law and order issues.
CAJ Conflict Mediation.
Political discussions with representatives of political parties.
Religion and Faith discussions.
Young people and the EEC - NI issues.
Broadening our horizons - other conflict situations.
History sessions - local history and detailed history sessions.
Cultural traditions group work.

6 Community Involvement/Empowerment

What is community development?
What areas of practical action in our local area can we initiate?
What community development groups/social justice groups could we join?
Political parties involvement.
Non-violent action groups.
What group can we support that supports law and justice? What cross community groups could we organise ourselves?

● David McKittrick, Protestant And Catholic Encounter

A Field Officer's perspective

Starting Out

I still remember how difficult it was to listen to comments like, "PACE is just a talking shop". It was a reporter for Radio Ulster's *Fathom Line* who made that memorable remark. I can laugh at it now. Fancy a reporter who lives from 'talk' attaching such a low value on talking!

I know now just how difficult it is for some people to be able to share their experiences and how much strength it takes to communicate with Christian candour. It is difficult to do so at any time, but risky when the subject is an issue which divides Roman Catholics and Protestants. Many people would be delighted if Churches were able to meet each other to talk. In some situations talking is controversial enough to shake foundations - just think of the controversy over talking to Sinn Fein.

The reporter could not have been more wrong. Talk, when it is from the whole person communicating with honest openness, is neither cheap nor easy: it is a powerful agent for change. I was, at the time of meeting this reporter, too new to the work to be able to affirm the work he was devaluing. The other attack which was painful was, "PACE is just a middle-class group of do-gooders". This attempts to wound by guilt. I am supposed to feel guilty about being middle-class.

What the commentator does not appear to recognise is that middle-class members have problems too in serving in a divided society. What I did not know, at the time, was that PACE groups have a good social mix. Now I would start to wonder why the person who makes such a comment was so cynical and harboured such disdain for groups who work for the greater good of the community.

After about six months of field work and getting to know all the PACE groups, I was able to sit down and wonder at their diversity. One group would meet mainly in each others' houses, while another would organise meetings in public places and invite speakers to address a particular issue.

In their composition there is also variety. One group, for example, consists of members drawn from two churches, one a Presbyterian Church and the other a Roman Catholic Church. The two Churches take ownership of the group and feel responsible for it. At first, this group was a group of Presbyterians who met to develop their understanding

of the conflict in Northern Ireland and to develop peace activities. When it had existed for some time it decided that it was disabled by being totally of one tradition. At this point contact with the nearest Roman Catholic Church began, and the group has grown from there. Now it is planning its first residential weekend training course which will include group leadership skills in experiential work, leading the group in prayer, developing forms of worship to meet group needs and singing together.

At present the Executive Committee of PACE is involved in the preparation of a 'Five Year Plan' which will give us a vision for the near future. In keeping with our name, Protestant and Catholic Encounter, the emphasis is on encounter leading to better mutual understanding.

Encountering

While I was struggling over the best way to bring about encounter I discovered a book titled *Community Conflict Skills* by Mari Fitzduff. The impact of that book on me is still strong, and all my experience confirms its wisdom. I still regard it as the most useful guide for anybody interested in promoting encounter between the 'two communities'. It is vital to point out, however, that I had difficulties and failures at first. This does not mean that I do not have failure now, but it took me sometime to understand why I had such failures!

The book is an 'Aladdin's Cave' of group activities which promote dialogue and interaction among its members. It is easy to pick up the book, select a group activity and plan a group session based on that activity. This is in fact what I did. Some sessions worked well, but many did not. I know now that my weakness was my being uncomfortable when emotion is being expressed in the group.

It all seems too obvious now, that if a group is involved in activity stimulating dialogue on difficult issues, there is likely to be fear, anger or grief present. Because I had not been prepared for this, I became tense when emotion came up, and my ability to trust my intuition caved in. The member of the group who was communicating the personal story or expressing anger at another member was quick to sense my discomfort and the group became a place in which being 'open' was too risky.

Recently, I was reading the book again and was surprised to find that the need for the group leader to be comfortable

about emotion being expressed in the group was stressed in the introduction! It is the old story, I can only understand things when I am ready for them. What happened to awaken me to my need?

Training

It was through attending a training course that I started to wake up to my need. The course was a weekend residential, about 'Prejudice Reduction', led by the Quaker Peace Education team. Their work raised my self-awareness about the role of emotion in group activity. I began to see how important it was to create the right conditions if difficult personal experiences were to be shared.

I have involved myself in several 'QPEP Weekends' since then, and I have also arranged for QPEP to take weekends for PACE members. Their work has helped some PACE groups to become more activity-based in their approach to anti-sectarian work.

From experiences of this kind, I had a revelation. Revelation is a word for some major intervention of a spiritual kind, and I use the word with due regard for all that that involves. That is exactly how it felt to me. I started to pay more attention to what was going on inside me. This may sound simple, but I find that it is in reality quite difficult to be in touch with the whole 'self'. What happens on the outside can dominate perceptions and thereby cut off part of awareness. If I am leading a group, I now have more data available to me. This is a valuable asset when leading.

I have worked with women co-leaders who know exactly what paying attention to inner being is about. In fact, I find that women are usually more sensitive to their subjectivity than men. Now, when I try an activity from Mari Fitzduff's book there is more chance that something goodwill come of it. What impact will it have to be in a group where openness is facilitated? I will list the effects as I have experienced them:

- 1 If the leader is not uneasy when group members become involved in open dialogue the group feels safe.
- 2 When openness among the group prevails, the members feel close to each other.
- 3 A caring relationship develops among the group members.
- 4 Members feel that they have had a memorable experience.

- 5 If the leader is open about his/her subjectivity the group members become more sensitive to their feelings too.
- 6 The group develops energy.
- 7 If the group stays together for several years, the members find that the group is a place which facilitates personal change.
- 8 Members find that prejudices can be allowed to drop away.
- 9 Members' personal relationships become more satisfying.
10. Members become more trusting of their intuitions.

Powerful

These demonstrate how powerful the experience of being in a group can be, and how productive the experience can be in facilitating mutual understanding. Most members resist open encounter until it is clear that the group is a trustworthy place. Overcoming resistance, however, requires patience as well as skill. There is a progression which usually follows this sequence:

- 1 Group members intellectualise. The third person is used to begin talking. Expression like "one" or "it is the case that ..." are often used. The effect of this is to keep group members at a distance.
- 2 The first existential communications which give insight into the speaker's experience of a topic are about the past.
- 3 Group members start to listen more attentively.
- 4 Empathy develops.
- 5 Contributions are made which deal with present experience. It may be a response to another group member's 'story'.
- 6 Conflicts between members are confronted and talked through so that the parties to the conflict remain allies. These experiences produce definite changes between the persons in conflict.

In my experience of leading PACE groups I have never got past the fourth stage. To move to stage five needs time such as exists on a weekend residential. Even on weekend residential stage six is rarely reached.

Outreach

PACE has over the last four years recovered some of its former energy for reaching out to the community at large. In the last few months there have been a local festival and a local conference. The arts are forming a larger part of our activity.

A youth programme is currently underway which involves teenagers in cross community arts activity of a long term nature. At present, two drama projects and a photography project are running. The young people in the first drama project reached the penultimate stage of selection of the Lloyds Theatre Challenge. The successful drama groups perform their play in the National Theatre in London along with other youth drama groups. Our Drama group started their project early in 1991.

The arts have proved to be a facilitating medium in which to explore the two traditions. The photography project starts from family albums to explore photography as a medium in which to make a personal statement about cultural identity.

In 1993, PACE group members will be able to enrol for creative drama work with 'Out and Out' Theatre Company in a week-long residential course. The resulting performance will tour the groups, and the PACE members who present the play will then discuss the issues of the play with other PACE members who form the audience. The drama will try to be pro-active in combating sectarianism.

Since February 1992, a group of PACE members and members of Women Together have been sharing a training course led by counsellors from CRUSE. The course was set up in response to the need for support for those families who are victims of sectarian murder.

Other groups, such as The Cross group also carry our victim support work, and the groups involved will be consulted soon so that a better understanding of the work will be achieved and greater mutual support developed.

Are there any Problems?

I am frequently confronted by two problems, despair and detachment. Nearly all PACE groups, excluding the most recently formed, include members who have been active in PACE for twenty years. In that time they have energetically pursued a better understanding of their place in our divided society and greater understanding and empathy with the members of the other tradition. But the conflict continues and atrocities still occur. In this situation it is difficult to sustain faith in the value of your

effort. As one murder follows another even the most committed have to struggle to avoid the state of numbness which sets in when there is no available way to express sorrow, assuage anger or share our fears. Groups wax and wane as despair or numbness takes hold. Those groups which are able to meet the endless strife with some resilience have found that experiential work and the personal friendships that develop in the groups have supported them.

The members of a PACE group, recently formed, have set three goals for the future:

- To work on myself
- To work on the group
- To work on the town

In these goals is the recognition that belonging to a PACE group is first and foremost an opportunity for each member to work against his or her own oppression. Part of our oppression is the numbness which creeps up on us as one sectarian atrocity follows another. Being with a group of people who share their concerns with one another keeps us in touch with our compassion.

Working on the group has the beneficial effect of identifying the shared features which bind us together whilst working "on the town" requires the group to take pride in its home, identify the fears which undermine pride and seek to address the injustices which lie at the root of our oppression.

Understanding

In concluding, I would assert that the work of mutual understanding, which PACE undertakes, is not a soft option. Frequently, the much-needed groups which are bent on working for structural changes, which will address discrimination, undervalue mutual understanding work. Mutual understanding work is in reality daunting; I must learn to accept myself if I am to become open to the members of the other community.

Accepting myself will sometimes mean facing the self-deceptions which hold my intolerance in place and destroy my respect for others who are different: this is not a task for the faint-hearted. In undertaking this task we are engaging in an act of faith with invisible costs and results which are difficult, if not impossible, to measure.

When we grow a little towards welcoming diversity, however, the effect on the quality of life is easily felt. It is such change that sustains a PACE group and makes belonging to it worthwhile.