

# Clinical Sociology Review

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Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 10

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1-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

van der Merwe, Hendrik W. and Odendaal, Andries (1991) "Constructive Conflict Intervention in South Africa: Some Lessons,"  
*Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 10.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol9/iss1/10>

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# Constructive Conflict Intervention in South Africa: Some Lessons

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, South Africa has lacked a culture of trust in negotiation as a conflict accommodation mechanism. During the security clampdown of the P. W. Botha era in the 1980s and subsequent polarization, concepts such as negotiation and mediation were viewed with suspicion in various quarters. However, paradoxically, the labour legislation introduced in 1979 promoted black empowerment, which was to lead to improved prospects of meaningful negotiation and the acceptability of mediation in resolving labour disputes. Concurrently, the township turbulence of the mid-1980s also led to local-level negotiations between blacks and whites. It was found at the national political level that, whilst the time was not ripe for mediation, low-profile facilitation as a more acceptable form of intervention in fact paved the way for the political breakthrough of 1990. Insights developed during this period led to the formulation of a number of principles of communication and included the reconciliation of seemingly contrasting options such as negotiation and coercion, impartiality and concern, and incremental steps and radical goals.

### *Editor's Introduction:*

This article illustrates the international nature of clinical sociology. Working in a politically troubled country, the authors demonstrate how conflict resolution can be effective at the national political level. In their article, the authors

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Revised version of paper presented at the Research Committee 26, Sociotechnics-Sociological Practice, of the World Congress of Sociology, Madrid, Spain, on 12 July 1990. A travel grant from the Human Sciences Research Council, which made attendance of this conference possible, is gratefully acknowledged.

relate what they have accomplished to a theoretical explication of conflict resolution; this article indeed demonstrates how theory can be put into effective action.

The authors are in a unique position in South Africa. Their success in negotiation is all the more unusual because of the troubled political climate in which the negotiations took place. Because of the unique situation of the authors, they were asked to prepare a brief introduction to the article which places it in the broader context of their work. This introduction follows:

***Authors' Introduction:***

Hendrik W. van der Merwe, a prominent Quaker and longtime peace-maker and bridge-builder, commands respect from most political camps in South Africa. He pioneered the concept and practice of facilitation of political communication in South Africa at a time when the parties were not ready for formal mediation. He has facilitated and mediated on community, regional, and national levels. He arranged a cease-fire between warring factions in the well-known Crossroads community, mediated between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front in Natal, and in 1984 arranged the first meetings between government supporters and the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress in exile in Lusaka, breaking a twenty-four-year deadlock and significantly influencing public opinion in South Africa.

Van der Merwe, as director of the Centre for Intergroup Studies at the University of Cape Town, and his staff, have over the years also pioneered training in negotiation and mediation in community and political conflict. The secret of their success was their ability to balance their constant nonalignment to any political group, with compassion and concern for the suffering. The formulation of one of the principles of communication mentioned in the article was based on these experiences.

In 1986 and 1988 Van der Merwe organized the First and Second National Conferences on Negotiation and Mediation in Community and Political Conflict, and launched the South African Association for Conflict Intervention (SAACI) and Facilitation and Mediation Services (FMS).

In 1990 a project on the Interpretation and Control of Violence (ICOV) was launched at the request of leaders of the major political parties, and in 1991 Van der Merwe was called in as a mediator between the wide range of community and government parties and groups concerned with the allocation of land to squatters (largely African), who will now be given access to urban resources under the new policies of the country.

## Introduction

The end of the Cold War between the superpowers and the decline of ideological conflict has been accompanied by the emergence of new dimensions of conflict: between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, North and South, industrial and developing countries. While the world seems unable to rid itself of conflict and violence, new perspectives on conflict and ways to handle it have brought hope. There is some movement away from confrontation to joint problem-solving, from win-lose to win-win outcomes, from military to political security, and from coercion to cooperation.

Innovative and constructive conflict intervention in apartheid South Africa has contributed toward several breakthroughs and progress toward a negotiated settlement. Some lessons that have been learned from the South African experiences are presented below in three categories: the need for empowerment of the weaker parties, the need for informal facilitation rather than formal mediation, and the reconciliation of seemingly contrasting options.

## A History of Distrust

Efforts at facilitating the process of communication between conflicting parties in South Africa have taken place against the background of a history of distrust. It is necessary to refer briefly to this historical context, since the process of constructive conflict intervention is determined by it. In 1988 the Centre for Intergroup Studies (CIS) in Cape Town formulated thirty-three principles of communication that were distilled from local experiences in conflict intervention (CIS, 1988; and Van der Merwe et al., 1990). The central historical experiences and reasoning underlying these principles are discussed.

South African history is not kind toward the concept of negotiated settlements as a method of conflict accommodation. The wrecks of abandoned treaties litter the pages of history books. In 1838 the Afrikaner migrants to the interior, members of the Great Trek, were split down the middle on the very issue of negotiations. One group under Piet Retief wanted to negotiate with Dingane, the Zulu king, for a piece of land to live on in Natal. The other group under Hendrik Potgieter felt there existed no precedent of a treaty made and honoured and were not willing to risk their future on the feeble basis of a signed document. Potgieter split from Retief and trekked into the interior of the Transvaal, prepared to find and defend a living space with the gun. Retief went to meet Dingane. The negotiations succeeded and a treaty was signed, but at the farewell ceremony to Retief and his men, Dingane suddenly ordered them to be seized and executed. His warriors then proceeded to attack the unsuspecting "laagers"

of Retief's followers. To the Afrikaner the verdict of history was clear: Retief was naive; Potgieter was the realist.

Obviously, the Afrikaner were not alone in their suspicion of the trustworthiness of treaties. The black leaders had as much reason to be profoundly skeptical. The great Sotho king Moshoeshoe, for example, had consistently chosen the way of peaceful negotiations to that of violent conflict. He conducted one session of negotiations after another with the presidents of the Republic of the Orange Free State and with British colonial officials. They signed treaties. But Moshoeshoe discovered to his great disillusionment that these treaties did not have greater power than the hunger for land. Nor were they necessarily tools of justice. After the war in 1856 with the Free State Republic, the boundaries between Lesotho and the Free State were renegotiated, but Moshoeshoe sent back his copy of the treaty and refused to add his mark. "And it was only after two days of wearisome argument, with the old chief vacillating pathetically in the face of continual pressure, that he at last complied" (Sanders, 1975:241).

As the power imbalance between white and black became greater and greater, blacks became increasingly irrelevant as negotiating partners—to the point of their being purposefully ignored in the most important negotiated document of this century: the Constitution of the Union of South Africa of 1910. The few entrenched constitutional privileges that this constitution granted to black South Africans, such as qualified voting rights to blacks in two of the provinces, the Cape and Natal, were removed in 1956 when the National Party enlarged and loaded the Senate as well as the Appeal Court Bench. It was a move that almost succeeded in maintaining legal respectability, but it failed utterly to strengthen respect for the spirit of constitutional procedures. Henceforth, relations between white and black would be governed by benign paternalism at best and stern repression at worst.

It is a paradoxical fact that negotiations between the dominant white and black power blocks became an important item in the political debate again—and indeed a conceivable possibility—during the P. W. Botha era (1978–1989). The government of State President P. W. Botha can best be understood as a transitional government (cf. Bergeron, 1990). Characteristic of such governments, Botha tried to implement reform measures while at the same time keeping firm control of the process. His rule became characterized by the State of Emergency, the prominence of the "securocrats," and the serious repression of political groupings suspected of revolutionary ideals. Yet, on the other hand, he introduced reform, and although very few people outside the National Party were deeply impressed by the extent of his reform measures, they were important because they revealed a fundamental shift in the hearts and minds of the National Party leadership. For example, the institution of the tri-cameral

parliament, though defective and impotent as a constitutional solution, broke the centuries-old mental block in National Party thinking to any idea of power-sharing with blacks. The abolition of influx control effectively shelved the myth that South African cities, and with them the South African economy, belonged to whites only. The abolition of the laws that regulated sexual intercourse and marriage between races symbolised, to a large extent, the defeat of the theological and moral underpinnings of the ideology of racial purity. Not only was the whole structure of apartheid showing cracks in its foundation, but with it the centuries-old assumptions about the power relationship between white and black.

The National Party leadership was beginning to understand that it would have to negotiate with black leaders for a new future. The ambiguity of its position could not be maintained forever. In 1988 Van der Merwe wrote: "While I do not want to play down the intensity and viciousness of the security clampdown in the mid-1980s, I firmly believe that this is not endemic in South African society, but a passing phase. To the extent that the moral base of apartheid has been eroded . . . white (including Afrikaner) leaders lack the moral commitment to such repressive measures as part of a long-term policy. For the moralists and pragmatists in the establishment, such measures can only be justified as control mechanisms during the process of reform" (Van der Merwe 1988:193).

The inevitability of negotiating with the liberation movements, although clear to those with eyes that wanted to see, was not part of the public rhetoric of the P. W. Botha government. The Rubicon had not yet been crossed. The government did accept that negotiations would have to take place, but only with black leaders acceptable to it. The liberation movements, especially the African National Congress (ANC), remained anathema. It was the Botha government that whipped up the frenzy about the "total onslaught." The security clampdown had to be justified, and that was done by demonising movements such as the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the United Democratic Front (UDF). It belongs to the paradox of this government that while negotiations became a respectable concept in official rhetoric, the very suggestion of negotiations with the ANC (unless, of course, it surrendered) was considered a treacherous idea.

Concurrently, the mood within resistance movements outside and, especially, inside the country hardened. Those at the receiving end of the security clampdown found less and less reason to be moderate. "Non-collaboration" became the essence of resistance, and the heat was turned on those suspected of collaboration. The homeland leaders experienced this heat, but even more so, those persons who were willing to serve as councillors of the black townships. To be suspected of being a "sell-out" was tantamount to a death sentence in

some circles. The gruesome "necklace" was probably the most potent symbol of this utter disgust with collaboration.

On the whole, the 1980s were not a profitable time for constructive conflict intervention. "Mediation," "peace-making," and "negotiation" were concepts heavily loaded with implications that were politically unacceptable on all sides. The situation was too polarised and the middle ground too weakened for these concepts to have real credibility. Yet, at no other time in South African history were white and black as close to sitting down for meaningful negotiations.

### **Empowerment Made Negotiation Possible**

*Principle 7: Where there is gross asymmetry of power between adversaries, a process of empowerment is essential* (Van der Merwe et al., 1990).

The power relationship between white and black is at the heart of the matter. Where there is a serious asymmetry of power between adversaries, peace treaties will invariably reinforce the asymmetry. Rather than contributing to the establishment of justice and peace, they will entrench the status quo. A basic principle is that parties equal in power are better able to reach a settlement that is balanced and therefore has the potential to last than when there is an imbalance in power. The political developments of the last two decades have contributed to the potential for peace precisely because they have contributed in various ways to the empowerment of black South Africans.

An important part of the process of empowerment was the success of the liberation movements in influencing and manipulating international opinion. The sanctions campaign was a potent instrument in their hands. However, it was perhaps internal developments that most favoured the process of black empowerment.

The Botha government itself supplied the tool that proved most effective for the empowerment of black people—the legalisation of black trade unions. Since 1979 trade unionism has experienced remarkable growth amongst black workers, not only in terms of numbers and organisation, but also in terms of being an effective political force, a tool of empowerment. The Centre for Intergroup Studies report (CIS, 1988), citing a case study of strike action by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1987, observed that their (NUM's) ability "... to disrupt an essential basis of the economy has entrenched the union's position as a legitimate and powerful negotiating partner. This was proved despite the lack of the success of the strike in material terms" (CIS, 1988:37). There can be no doubt that the development of trade unionism, despite its negative aspects such as some very ugly cases of scab bashing, has contributed largely to

the empowerment of the weaker party and therefore to improving the possibility of negotiation in South Africa.

An important aspect of this process of empowerment was the creation of institutional structures for the accommodation of conflict in industrial relations which were not only legal, but also enjoyed legitimacy. The conflict resolution structure created and institutionalised through the various labour laws of the P. W. Botha era introduced and gave respectability to the concept of collective bargaining.

Within this structure for the accommodation of conflict, the role of a third party, either as mediator or as arbitrator, was also legally recognised. The increasing demand for mediators in industrial relations and their success in mediating a satisfactory settlement can be seen from the fact that, in a survey of twenty-nine unions for the year 1986, mediation evoked the most favourable response as a procedure for resolving disputes. Eight of the fourteen unions that had resorted to mediation reported satisfaction at the outcome, primarily because the unions maintained their independence and the mediator was seen to be neutral. Two unions were not satisfied with the mediation outcome. Of the fifteen unions which opted for arbitration, and therefore were party to Industrial Court rulings, nine were not satisfied and only two were satisfied with the outcome (CIS, 198:80). The increasing popularity of mediation in industrial disputes in the 1980s can largely be attributed to the growing expertise of IMSSA (Independent Mediation Service of South Africa), which managed to establish itself as a credible mediating body with specialised expertise.

The importance of this development for the creation of a South African culture that trusts the process of mediation and negotiation can hardly be overestimated. At least in the industrial sector (white), management is now learning to treat (black) labour with healthy, if grudging, respect and to be aware of the deep interdependency of both parties. A highlight of this process has been the remarkable agreement in May 1990 between Saccola (the association of big employers) and Cosatu and Nactu (the two main black trade union federations) on recommendations for labour legislation to be proposed to Parliament (*Weekly Mail*, 17 May 1990).

### **Empowerment at Local Levels**

The concept of negotiation also made a breakthrough at another level of society. The great turbulence of 1985–86 when “unrest” spread throughout the country and involved even small rural townships—was explained in official circles as a calculated strategy by revolutionary forces to make townships un-governable. Swilling (1989), on the basis of case studies collected from thirty



townships, has argued that ungovernability was not the primary strategy, but that, in a paradoxical way, some of the most constructive and meaningful attempts at negotiations in the history of the country took place at the local level during this time. What happened, according to Swilling, was that local bodies—an “intense network of trade unions, community organisations, student and scholar movements and political organisations” functioning under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front (UDF)—took up issues of local concern and organised protest campaigns such as stay-aways, consumer boycotts, and strikes. This led to the development of a “dual power” situation, with the community organisations functioning as alternative political structures. Preconditions for the first meaningful negotiations with representatives of the establishment at local levels were thereby created. White business concerns, especially, showed themselves ready to negotiate with community leaders, but in some cases government officials were also involved. The short-term benefits flowing from some of the negotiations strengthened the popular support of the community organisations and had the important side-effect of weakening the noncollaborationist position. This promising development was frustrated when the State of Emergency was introduced.

Friedman (1989) has expressed criticism of Swilling’s analysis, saying that he has idealised the picture and ignored some of the complexities of the situation. If the government mistook what was happening as an attempt at ungovernability, it was because some of the people in the “struggle” laboured under the same misunderstanding! Friedman, however, is in agreement with Swilling’s basic thesis that a real potential for meaningful negotiations at the local level did exist at the time because of the empowerment process amongst black communities. It was an option successfully exploited by some, even though, according to Friedman, there was not the same enthusiasm for this option amongst all concerned.

There were signs, therefore (although at times it took the eyes of faith to detect these signs), of developments within South Africa at both the national and local levels which were favourable to negotiation as a strategy for conflict accommodation.

### **Third Party Intervention: Mediation**

*Principle 16: Where negotiation between adversaries is not possible because of rigid stances, inadequate communication or structural obstacles, mediation is required* (Van der Merwe et al., 1990).

Whereas negotiations became possible at some levels of society, the tense, polarised climate at the national political level meant that the major parties were

not yet ready to enter into negotiations. It was a situation that called for third party intervention.

It is necessary to distinguish between neutral and partisan intervention. Whereas partisan intervention has the aim of favouring a specific position or party, the purpose of neutral intervention by a third party is usually to mediate between conflicting parties, to improve communication and to promote a negotiated settlement. Mediation, therefore, refers to intervention in a dispute or conflict by an acceptable, impartial, and neutral third party (Van der Merwe, 1989:88).

An important example of an attempt at mediating in the South African political conflict was the high-profile attempt by the Eminent Persons Group, representing the British Commonwealth, in 1986. Many observers described this mission as a failure, but such an evaluation misses the contribution that it made by happening at all, by formulating common ground between the parties, and by promoting the concept of third party intervention and the idea of a negotiated settlement.

The experience of the Eminent Persons Group showed, *inter alia*, that the time for formal negotiation or even mediation between the parties was not ripe. This left the option of informal mediation of facilitation.

### **Facilitation of Communication**

*Principle 17: Where formal mediation is not acceptable, informal mediation may be successful* (Van der Merwe et al., 1990).

Facilitation can be distinguished as a specific option on the continuum of conflict intervention possibilities. It is primarily concerned with the facilitation of communication between conflicting parties. Whereas in mediation there is a specific commitment to the outcome of the process (a settlement), facilitators are committed to communication as an end in itself. The facilitator is, in an almost technical way, concerned with ensuring that the relevant parties gain accurate information, regardless of the use they make of it. "For the facilitator, facilitation of communication is an end in itself, in much the same way as one can pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge or atomic power for the sake of power . . . . For these reasons a facilitator may, in situations of extreme polarisation and intense suspicion, be more acceptable to conflicting parties than a mediator. The neutral and almost technical services of the facilitator would appear to be more functional than the assistance of a mediator, who is morally committed to peacemaking" (Van der Merwe, 1989:95).

A breakthrough in facilitating communication between the establishment in South Africa and the ANC came in 1984. After establishing contact with the

Mandela family and the ANC in exile, Van der Merwe (an "honest Quaker broker," as the ANC referred to him), was asked by the ANC to introduce them to members of the government. In December he introduced Dr. Piet Muller, assistant editor of *Beeld*, the largest pro-government Afrikaans daily paper, to members of the ANC executive committee in Lusaka. Dr. Muller subsequently wrote two articles in his paper in which he described common ground between the National Party and the ANC and, in an editorial, *Beeld* called on the government to talk to the ANC. This was the first contact of its kind in twenty-four years and, because of the positive tone of the articles, it broke the deadlock. The readers of the Afrikaans press could, for the first time, read something about the ANC which was not a description of the evil of the organisation. In a subsequent interview on the prestigious Afrikaans programme, "Om die Waarheid Te Sê," Van der Merwe described the ANC leaders as reasonable, well-meaning South Africans who had only resorted to the armed struggle because all legal avenues were closed to them.

A number of encounters between various internal South African groupings and the ANC in exile subsequently took place. Giliomee (1990) has calculated that approximately fifty encounters took place between internal groupings and the ANC during the 1980s. It was the highly symbolic trip of prominent Afrikaners to Dakar, organised by the Institute for Democratic Alternatives for South Africa (IDASA), that especially captured the public imagination and contributed largely to breaking down some of the stereotypes that existed concerning the ANC. Without doubt, these "safaris" to the ANC and numerous conferences organised by IDASA made a large contribution to educating the (white) public and providing more reliable information concerning the ANC, and vice versa. Thus, the facilitation of communication contributed in preparing the way for the dramatic breakthrough of 1990.

### **Contrasting Options**

Would-be mediators or facilitators in South Africa not only had to face the absence of a culture of trust in negotiation as conflict resolution mechanism and the gross asymmetry in power between the conflicting parties, but they also had to face the fact that the situation evoked serious questions concerning the morality of intervention or attempts at "peace-making." Strong perceptions existed that the black people were oppressed and that the prevailing system was deeply unjust. This led to the moral pull toward activist programs that favoured the process of empowerment and a concomitant suspicion that anything else would compromise the struggle for liberation. A neutral mediating position shared the brunt of this suspicion. One of the most important lessons

learned during this time, therefore, was that intervention options should not be restricted to one type only, but that several contrasting options were available, ranging from the activist or partisan role to that of the mediator or facilitator. "While it is readily admitted that such options could result in ambivalence (or even schizophrenia), the . . . [thesis] is that, given the necessary sensitivity and initiative on the part of an intermediary, creative and constructive intervention is possible" (Van der Merwe, 1988). It is important to see the contrasting options not as contradictions, but as complementary options on a continuum of possible conflict intervention strategies. The following three examples may illustrate the point.

*(1) Principle 4: Coercion and negotiation are complementary aspects of the process of communication between adversaries* (Van der Merwe et al., 1990). Parties in conflict are obviously in communication with each other. If it were possible to ignore each other, there would be no conflict. This communication can take the form of coercion, with war or terrorism as extreme examples at one end of the continuum (speaking, as it were, with bombs and guns), and cooperative behaviour such as rational negotiations on the other end of the spectrum. "Wars may continue while peace negotiations are in progress, each side attempting to add military pressure to the force of diplomacy" (Curle in Van der Merwe, 1989:xiv). While coercion (including violence) and cooperation (including negotiation) stand in a relationship of tension toward each other, they are not mutually exclusive (Van der Merwe and Williams, 1987).

In South Africa there was a clear need for coercive measures aimed at empowering the weaker party and at changing a fundamentally unjust system. In the heat of the polarised debate, the option of negotiation was often seen as contradicting the "struggle," as being an opposing strategy to that of coercion. This, however, is a misconception. Negotiation should be seen as complementing pressure in the communication process between conflicting parties. By improving the quality of communication and understanding, negotiation will ensure more rational and effective pressures and more orderly change, thus reducing the likelihood of destructive violence. In other words, pressure for change was not lessened by facilitating communication between the political parties or by the negotiations that happened at the community and industrial levels. Rather, it became possible to apply these pressures and to respond to them in a more rational way.

Current negotiations between the government and the ANC should be seen within this context. The ANC relies heavily on the sanctions campaign of the international community, various forms of pressure within the country, and its own armed struggle as forms or, rather, symbols of coercion of its adversary. Some

of these pressures have made significant contributions to getting the government to the negotiating table. But the negotiating table is not the end goal. It is only a means toward the goal of justice and peace.

For that reason, certain sanctions will continue to play a role in exerting pressure on conflicting parties in South Africa. Sanctions, in order to complement negotiations, must, however, be constructive and conditional, and not like the conventional, emotional, vindictive, anti-apartheid campaign targeted against only one party. They must be rational, based on a cost-benefit analysis (Van der Merwe, 1989:84–86). And, of course, sanctions should be aimed at all parties in the negotiating process; at the ANC to guard against authoritarian and one-party rule and the violation of human rights, at the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Conservative Party to persuade them to enter into negotiations, and at others.

This understanding of the complementarity of coercion and negotiation applies also to the theological and moral debate concerning the relationship between peace and justice. For decades the quest was for justice, but the popular slogan had it that no peace was possible before justice has been established, thereby making justice an absolute precondition of peace. This purist view ignored the dialectic dynamic of the interplay of peace and justice on each other. Peace contributes to justice as justice contributes to peace. It follows that the means used to pursue these goals of justice and peace, namely empowerment and conciliation, respectively, are complementary. The fact that, in a given situation, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the quest for justice can in no way cancel the remaining relevance of striving for peace. South Africa needs its prophets (of justice) as well as its priests (of reconciliation). Admittedly, the responsibilities, tasks, and styles of peacemakers and prophets are different and can cause severe tensions within any one individual or between individuals and groups (Van der Merwe, 1989:116).

*(2) Principle 15: An incremental approach to change can be reconciled with radical goals of fundamental change (Van der Merwe et al., 1990).*

The violence that occurred in South Africa involved, in the great majority of cases, people who did not differ on the end goal of the political process—the abolition of apartheid—but who differed on means and strategies. This fact can partly be explained by the natural tendency to regard those who work toward goals different from your own as enemies, and to regard those who have the same goal but employ different strategies as traitors. Traitors are perceived to threaten the hegemony of your group and therefore also its eventual success. This gives rise to intense animosity that may surpass the hatred felt toward the common enemy. In South Africa the violence between Inkatha and the UDF in Natal, for example, can be seen in this light. The difference in strategy in

this case can largely be explained by the willingness to work in a gradual way toward change (Inkatha) and a radical strategy of noncollaboration (UDF).

The experience of the trade unions proved that the acceptance of short-term gains need not conflict with their pursuit of long-term goals. The unions had to face the issue of whether to register in terms of the relevant legislation, thereby "collaborating" within a government system. Their experience, after registering, was that the organisational and legal space now offered to them provided the platform for challenging the structure itself. The bargaining reputation thus established in the short term consolidated strength for the attainment of long-term goals (CIS, 1988:56). The community groups, too, realised that they need not compromise fundamental goals and principles by participating in some aspects of the existing system. As these organisations gained in public support (partly a result of successful short-term benefits), the danger of being co-opted by the government was reduced.

(3) *Principles 22–24: Impartiality is compatible with compassion and concern* (Van der Merwe et al., 1990).

One of the most important qualities of a mediator or a facilitator is impartiality. Usually intermediaries can be drawn from outside parties which have little or no interest in the outcome of the dispute. It became impossible to be neutral about the South African conflict, however. This conflict was internationalised to an extraordinary degree, owing, inter alia, to the universal dimensions of the problem. The South African problem is about racism, colonialism, and the exploitation of the poor. South Africa reminds the whole world of a time when white superiority over other races was an obvious presupposition, and no one enjoys this memory. Neutrality toward South Africa came to mean indifference toward exploitative racism.

If it was almost impossible to find neutral intermediaries from outside, it was obviously more difficult inside the country. "Farewell to Innocence," the title of Allan Boesak's doctoral dissertation (1977), implied that the time for presumed clean hands was past. Each person in South Africa had to make a choice. Either you were supporting apartheid, if not actively, then through your silence, or you were actively against it. Neutrality was as immoral as the support of apartheid.

Anyone intent on playing a mediating role in the South African situation, therefore, had to face a very difficult moral decision. Experience has demonstrated, however, that impartiality is not incompatible with concern.

After a particularly violent interaction between the government and the ANC in 1982–1983, involving bomb explosions inside the country and S.A. Defence Force raids on ANC quarters in Lesotho and Mozambique, Van der Merwe issued a statement expressing disapproval of violence on both sides, sympathy

with victims on both sides, belief in elements of goodwill on both sides, and the intention to make financial contributions to victims on both sides. In spite of the fact that this statement was attacked from both sides of the conflict, it played a major role in the development of the relationship of trust between him and the ANC and between him and the establishment in subsequent years. This enabled his role as facilitator to develop.

Impartiality does not mean indifference toward serious moral issues. On the contrary, impartial concern may reflect a specific dimension of morality.

Given the fact that the majority of the South African population is Christian, the debate on the morality of impartiality took place in Christian theological terms. The well-known *Kairos Document* categorised the dominant Christian reactions to the political situation into three types: namely, those supporting the status quo theologically; those who emphasized reconciliation (which Kairos rejected as a dishonest attempt not to rock the boat—no reconciliation with sin is possible); and those who took up the prophetic option of denouncing the sin of apartheid in word and deed (Kairos Theologians, 1985). Whereas there is obvious validity in what Kairos said, it was too one-dimensional. The “preferential portion for the poor” need not imply as a necessary complement the demonising of the rich and powerful. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), for example, have a consistent tradition of “answering that of God in every person.” This approach enables them to empathize with all parties to a conflict. They have established world-wide respect as mediators. In fact, the Christian gospel has at its heart the concept of *agape*. This Greek word for love is distinguished from its synonyms in Greek by the fact that it describes a quality of love that does not depend on the merit of the object of that love. In other words, an approach that refuses to relate to “sinners” because of a selective concern for the “sinned-against” may have strategic value, but cannot claim to have sole rights to justifiable morality.

A distinction is therefore necessary between a concern for the suffering and predicaments of human beings and preferential support for any one party in the conflict. “Genuine concern can be expressed for a group without supporting any of its particular stands, goals, policies, or methods” (Van der Merwe, 1989:91). Selective concern based on partisan politics is deplorable. Selective concern based on humanitarian feelings is understandable, but it remains important for mediators and facilitators to maintain their impartiality in order to function successfully.

## Conclusion

In his foreword to Van der Merwe’s book (1989:xiv), Adam Curle describes the “hideously difficult position” of a mediator. “The protagonists with whom

they deal try to make use of them for their own ends. They also mistrust them; for how could they really be their friends if, as they claim, they are also the friends of their enemies? . . . But the position of someone working in his or her own country is immeasurably more complex. They are *part of the situation they are attempting to alter*. How can they balance the necessary impartiality with the equally necessary partisanship of change? How can [they] avoid the inner tensions and contradictions of what the psychoanalysts call 'doubled (and in this case, sometimes treble, I suspect) role trouble'?"

The lessons learned over the past two decades have proved, however, that the option for neutral third party intervention is not only possible, but also effective. It is an option, alongside other options, that can be pursued with credibility and integrity. The option for constructive conflict intervention is not a "sell-out" position to be reserved for the faint-hearted. It is an option for those who love peace as much as they love justice.

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*Weekly Mail*

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