

The Art of Mediation and the Urban Contextualization of Mediation

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1. The Art of Mediation

Even though the definition between “mediation” and “reconciliation” is very similar in theological and social contexts, they have different etymological meanings. “Mediation” is derived from the Latin word “mediatorem (nom. mediator).” It means one who intervenes “between parties in a dispute,” which was originally applied to Christ (Oxford Dictionary, 1993: 737). “Reconciliation” is derived from “reconciliare,” which means “harmonize,” “make friendly again after an estrangement,” “restore,” and “settle a quarrel (Oxford Dictionary, 1993: 1003).” The goal of “reconciliation” is to restore and reconcile structural conflicts more broadly. Reconcilers are able to offer their opinions, but the role of “mediation” is to take a neutral position towards problem solving in divided communities and is thus narrower in scope. Mediators cannot offer their opinions or be influenced by political interests.

Mediation has developed in the private or public sectors, national or international sectors, and institutional and business sectors, etc. With the necessity of international mediation, the role of institutional mediation has rapidly increased since the 1970s (Burton and Dukes, 1990).¹ But the importance of community-based mediation settings on interracial and ethnic conflicts has been recognized since the Watts Riots in 1965 and on multiracial and multicultural conflicts since the LA Riots in 1992. Before the Watts Riots, the “white-black” conflict in the 1960s was extremely typical in America.

Under the socio-cultural pluralism of urban communities, “traditional” or “prescriptive mediation approaches” that neglect understandings of cultural context are not suitable means of conflict resolution. In conflict-based urban contexts, the art of mediation is to find out how to adapt postmodern multicultural factors to rituals of mediation processes through “elicit approaches” and urban community settings. I will go into “prescriptive and elicit approaches” in

¹ Burton and Dukes (1990: 27) state, “Well-known mediators like U Thant, Henry Kissinger, and Terry Waite involved in with their great roles of mediation in international conflicts.”

greater detail in the next chapter. Even though “traditional” community-dispute programs including intra-community and inter-community conflict resolution have rapidly developed, we also need to modernize and innovate transformational mediation approaches towards postmodern multicultural contextualization, especially in poor urban communities. The community-based “transformational mediation” or “holistic mediation” approach attempts not only to adapt cultural factors of mediation to conflict resolution, but to plant socio- and religious-cultural rituals of mediation in community setting or developing community.

2. The Urban Contextualization of Mediation

1) On-the-Ground, Community-Based Mediation: Case Study

There are several case samples of community-based racial conflicts and mediation for learning about the importance of on-the-ground, community-based mediation.

Case Sample #1: Community-Based Racial Conflict

Church Worship-Oriented Mediation (Church-Centered Involvement)

In the summer of 2001, I participated in joint worship and prayer meetings sponsored by church leaders for fostering racial harmony between Korean-American churches and African-American churches since a Korean-American liquor store owner was killed by an African-American customer after an altercation in Washington, D.C. Through the mediation rituals, church and community leaders emphasized the need to recognize the importance of biblical love, peace and unity. But unfortunately, both communities' attempt at using “inside-building rituals” of mediation did not lead to next steps.

Evaluation: Religious network dynamics as tentative rituals of mediation can be a good approach in preventing a community from violence and racial hatred. But having more practical mediation meetings before or after rituals of mediation is very helpful **in** understanding the

causes of conflict and approaches to effective resolution. Further, after-care and follow-up measures towards ending conflict is needed in racially-based community conflicts.

Case Sample #2: Community-Based Multiracial Conflict

Table-Based Mediation (Government-Centered Involvement)

In the spring of 2004, I participated several times in a meeting of community-based racial conflict resolution as a member of a mediator's group. The conflict resulted from an argument among several Caucasian-Americans, most of them home-sellers, who lived across a Korean-owned liquor store, and several African-American residents. White Americans complained to the Korean store owner for selling liquor and for contributing to the community's unclean surroundings. Many African- and Hispanic-Americans hung around the store everyday. Although the owner had a worker who was in charge of cleaning outside and around the store, it was not enough to keep the surrounding area sufficiently clean. I found that the Caucasian-Americans were not simply concerned about the environment, but also about the decline in the value of their properties. After saying, "we are going to push our demands until the end," the Caucasian residents mentioned boycotting the renewal of the store's license several times. But the majority of African-American residents supported the store owners. The mediation was facilitated by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Washington, D.C. Mayor Office.

Evaluation: We reached a satisfied resolution after three meetings. However, I found two main problems with this community disputes: one was that the governmental officers-centered mediation and civilian negotiation groups wanted to resolve the conflict in a short time due to the limitations in their time. The other was that nobody was interested in the after-care and follow-up measures to contribute to ending this community conflict as was the case in Case Sample #1. Lastly, the parties, as well as the mediators and the civilian negotiators aimed too much to achieve the goals of conflict resolution by pushing the parties to reach an agreement within a short period of time. In this case, the Korean store owner, the minority party, will not have the sufficient time and space to establish and build his case due to obstacles, such as the potential racial prejudice and cultural and language barriers.

Case Sample #3: Community-Based Racial Conflict

Table-Based Mediation (Government-Centered Involvement)

In the summer of 2005, a community-based racial conflict between a Korean- American grocery store owner and an African-American child customer took place in Washington, D.C. as a result of the 5th-grade child's habitual stealing at the Korean- owned store. One day, the store owner took and searched her for stolen goods. In this situation, although the Korean owner found his lost goods, he faced a serious conflict because the child reported that "she was forcibly searched for stolen goods" to her mother. Several hours later, her mother appealed to the other African-American neighbors, which caused the incident to grow into a serious issue for the entire community. The African-American community held a demonstration against the Korean store owner for several days. The Korean owner reported the matter to me first, after which I (from APPA) organized a mediation committee group consisting of representatives from the U.S. Department of Justice, the Washington D.C. Mayor's Office, and several other organizations. Unfortunately, the African-American community was already irate and had organized a committee consisting of community leaders for an appeal. When our mediation group met them, I realized that I did not send anyone who could investigate the cause of conflict before the committee could be organized. But several people had visited the store to complain about the store owner's "mistake."

Evaluation: This is a very typical case of a "small minority-to-single dominant minority conflict," which can take place in single dominant minority communities such as African, Hispanic, Chinese, and Korean ones. The characteristics of "single dominant minority conflicts" are the rapid dissemination of distorted truth and news, outbursts of emotion, and the rapid mobilization of antagonistic action. In this case, a small minority group's opinion and self-assertion can be easily minimized and distorted by a single dominant minority. And the minority group will need to have sufficient time and space to make their points due to the obstacles they face as mentioned in the previous case sample. Additionally, the process of mediation will be

lengthened due to the single dominant community's strong identity, subjective belief, and excessive interests.

**Mediation Sample #4: Community-Based Racial Conflict and On-the-Ground
Community-Based Mediation (Civilian-Centered Involvement)**

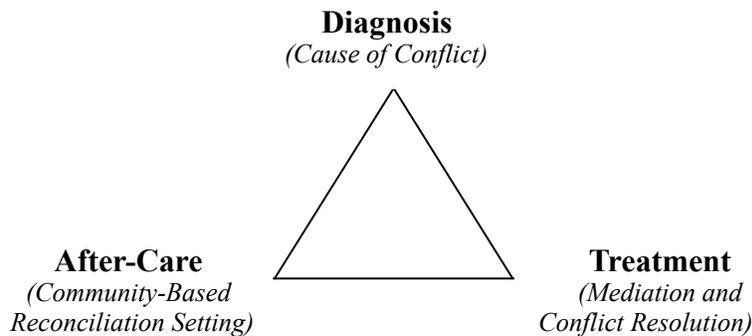
A conflict between a Korean-American store owner and an African-American customer took place, resulting in verbal and physical violence in downtown D.C. in 2006. It escalated into a serious racial conflict. In response, H. Street Community Development, Washington Inter-faith Council, APPA, and the Washington, D.C. Mayor Office organized a mediation committee. Fortunately, we reached a successful outcome through three mediation meetings, but to continually improve community relations, we met two more times. We decided to hold a candlelight prayer vigil and a block party sponsored by APPA several times a year to facilitate the harmony of the relationships between both communities. We had the mediation-based community programs for two years (during Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas). As of 2009, there have been no more racially-motivated conflicts in D.C. involving Korean-Americans and African-Americans.

2) Transformational Mediation:

- Three-Cornered Relation for Multiracial Community-Based Conflict Resolution

It is very important to foster racial harmony and build a better community as well as to provide the appropriate mediation tools. The goal of transformational mediation is to plant transformational or holistic mediation in multiracial conflict communities. According to <Figure 2>, it is based on a “three-cornered relation” approach toward transformational mediation and conflict resolution: conducting diagnoses to investigate causes of conflicts and providing treatment (or mediation) to resolve conflicts and after-care to foster racial harmony and a better community.

In spite of attaining a somewhat satisfactory outcome for the parties through the community-based mediation process, if mediators ignore the importance of long-term care, follow-up measures, and prevention of conflict escalation and racially-based postmodern conflicts, they will fail to produce more effective outcomes for the uprooting of racially-based community conflict. Therefore, in multiracial and multicultural-based community conflict resolution, the role of a mediator as a *community builder* to know a community’s cultural context and to manage on-the-ground, community-based mediation settings is more important than a “*skills transferer*” to facilitate table-based tentative mediation and reconciliation.



**<Figure1> Transformational Mediation
for Multiracial Community-Based Conflict Resolution**

3) Historical Background of Conflict Between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in D.C. - Perspectives and Stereotypes

Since the L.A. Riots of 1992, the racial tension between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in urban areas has become more prevalent. This is because at the time of the riots, many Korean-Americans operated small businesses in downtown L.A. And, even though Korean-American small business owners made up a minority of business owners with establishments in African-American communities, when compared with the tension between

African-Americans and business owners of other races, the tension between Korean-Americans and African-Americans was the greatest.

Scholars and community leaders have offered differing opinions and explanations for the underlying causes of the racial tension between Korean-Americans and African-Americans:

1) The conflict between the two races is typical for a multicultural nation like the US. Due to many immigrants becoming economically stable and capable of investing in small businesses (i.e. liquor stores, markets, dry cleaners, etc.) in African-American communities. Still, in non-African-American communities, a greater proportion of Korean-Americans ran similar small businesses (i.e. law offices, restaurants, medical offices, etc.). In African-American communities, though, this generated a more noticeable concern for competition and taking over of current African-American businesses. According to former County of Los Angeles Human Relations Commissioner Larry Aubry: “It is easy to target somebody who is less than you are, or who threatens you. The targeting was there. I would say that targeting was there because those people perceive the Korean merchants as the enemy.”² In other words, any race of people that was considered an enemy would have been targeted. Drawing on lessons learned from the civil rights movement, Professor Alex Norman of University of California, Los Angeles, stated:

... the civil rights movement was not just a movement for Blacks, it was a movement for the entire country and I think to that extent Blacks have always been much broader in their concept of what equality ought to mean to people... It was wrong to target those stores because in the final analysis, not only did it harm the Korean merchants, but it also harmed the community. It’s all a part of the hatred that we have to deal with.³

2) Due to Korean merchants running businesses in crime-ridden neighborhoods, then naturally, there is a higher likelihood of their businesses to suffer from criminal activity. Many customers of Korean-run businesses (especially liquor stores) were drug addicts and criminals; as a result, these customers and business owners were more prone to get into arguments that quickly

² Larry Aubry, “Why Are Koreans Targeted?” in *Black-Korean Encounter: Toward Understanding and Alliance*, Eui-Young Yu (ed.), Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies California State University, Los Angeles, 1994, p. 55.

³ Alex Norman, “Bigotry Is Bigotry,” in *Black-Korean Encounter*, p. 62.

escalated into more dangerous conflicts. However, Korean businesses located in safer neighborhoods rarely experienced such crimes.⁴

3) Cultural differences produce varying behaviors and attitudes that result in conflict. Many immigrants struggled with a language barrier, and were often unable to express themselves in a friendly manner. Also, many Korean-Americans were not familiar with African-American culture so they often misunderstood, for example, that their clients speaking loudly was not because they were angry. Professor Kye Young Park, University of California, Los Angeles, gives more examples:

Korean respondents most frequently mention the loudness, bad language, and shoplifting as inappropriate behavior demonstrated by Black patrons. By contrast, Black patrons most cite the negative attitudes of Korean merchants and employees, the feeling of being watched constantly, and the throwing money on the counter as inappropriate behaviors.⁵

4) Historical Background of Washington, D.C.

APPA is an organization that promotes racial harmony and conflict-resolution. APPA has a peace-building program, which provides a cultural approach to multiracial conflict. The organization has served as a mediator while providing conflict resolution for communities through this program. Influenced by the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, APPA has been particularly successful in shrinking the conflict between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in the Washington D.C. area through its centers in Northwest D.C. and Baltimore, Maryland. Through its ministry of serving food to the homeless, APPA has served traditional Korean foods such as Kimchi to African-Americans; APPA has been engaged in this ministry of “Kimchi Reconciliation” for over ten years and has since served over 50,000 African-Americans.

Mediation and conflict resolution program are in serious need, especially in the “traditionally neglected” poor urban communities such as New York, Chicago, Washington D.C. and Baltimore. According to the 2007 U.S. Census Bureau data, the population of Washington

⁴ Karen Bass, “Alcohol’s Relationship to Urban Violence: When Free Enterprise Threatens Community Welfare,” in *Black-Korean Encounter*, pp. 68-72. Bass gives the example of a higher probability that alcohol addicts will commit alcohol-related crimes.

⁵ Kye Young Park, “The Question of Culture in the Black/Korean American Conflict,” in *Black-Korean Encounter*, p. 40.

D.C. totaled 588,292. The ethnic populations could be broken down into the following: black 55.2%, white 39.4%, Hispanic or Latino origin 8.3%, and Asian 3.4%. 17.12% of the total population fell into the low-income branches. High crime levels and racial conflicts have posed serious problems for the city. According to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Report of *2007 Crime in the United States*, 181 people were killed in Washington D.C. Unlike in economically-developed urban cities where culture (e.g. theatre' artists, musicians and writers) and ethnic diversity thrives,⁶ poor urban communities foster a culture of crime, including violent crimes, such as murder and manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and property crime, such as burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft.

In this urban situation, churches and Christians have a role to play as mediators for planting the Kingdom culture and ethics for transforming communities. Therefore, for on-the ground community-based mediation and conflict resolution, the use of social capital is highly important. For this reason, I have worked to foster racial harmony and end homelessness in inner-city, Washington D.C. since 1988. Through these activities, APPA attempted to promote social capital in the low-income Shaw-Howard neighborhood. But social capital-based community mediation can be easily navigated with non-authority-oriented mediations, collective participation-based cultural mediations like movement or campaign-styled initiatives, and too much grass root-level mediation approaches in poor urban context.

⁶ See 2006 conference paper reported by The Core Cities Theology Network; *Cities of Culture Conference Report: whose Vision, which Agenda?*, September 2006, pp. 25-26, http://www.cctn.org.uk/documents/ccc_full_report.pdf.