

Some Good Stories of how Mediation Works

At the end of a thorough review of the priorities of the congregation a minister finds that he is left at odds with one family in the congregation. They used to be "*in charge of everything*" but as a result of the review many of the things that never happened unless "*they were involved*" were delegated to others. The Kirk Session were almost unanimous in believing that the new structures would be for the long term good of the church; but few people knew how to handle the extreme reaction of this family who set about sowing seeds of unrest with anyone who would listen to the story of how they had been "snubbed".

Their campaign included acting in hostile ways towards the minister and some office bearers – who felt quite intimidated, but powerless to address this family who felt so disenfranchised. This state of affairs festered away for several months until the five yearly visit by presbytery when the minister and members of the Kirk Session, in separate meetings, raised concerns that this uneasy state of affairs was affecting the morale and wellbeing of the whole congregation. The minister had also indicated to the presbytery committee that this situation was affecting his health and he was considering making a move to another charge or even leaving the ministry altogether.

The presbytery committee recognised that they did not have the expertise to intervene in this situation, but suggested that a trained mediator be asked to consult with the disenfranchised family, the minister and those key office bearers who were feeling most affected by this situation.

The Ministries Council arranged for a mediator to begin work with all parties, although to begin with it was not clear whether the disenfranchised family would be prepared to enter into discussions. However, when contact was made with them, it transpired that they were just as keen as the office bearers to talk about what had happened. The initial meeting with them was described as "the first time that anyone had allowed them to speak about what had so deeply hurt them".

To cut a long story short, it transpired that the intentions of the Kirk Session had never been communicated properly to the family and, as a result, they had perceived this as a very personal attack on them and not as a scheme designed to enhance the life of the congregation. An early acknowledgement of the failure in communication would have helped, but it turned out that it was not too late to acknowledge where lines of communication had broken down and this went a long way to satisfying the family that there was no intended slight. It also transpired that the family's deep love for their congregation was greater than any desire to cause disruption or strife, and in the meeting with the minister, facilitated by the mediator, it became apparent that both the minister and the family shared the best interests of the future life of the congregation. They set out an agenda of items that they could work on together and this was the beginning of the restoration of their relationship.

Their disposition was transformed on the following Sunday morning when there was an easy conversation at the church door between this family and the minister and the whole congregation were relieved at the beginning of a new chapter.