

Waging peace

Stephen Ruttle QC recently spoke at one of our Faith At Work lunches on the topic of mediation from a Christian perspective and the possibilities of conflict transformation.



Oliver Scutt
Associate
T: 020 7551 7689
o.scutt@bwbllp.com

Oliver is a member of our Faith-Based Organisations group and is a CEDR-accredited mediator.

Oliver Scutt was inspired at the transformative power of faith-based mediation and reconciliation

A few years ago, I qualified as a commercial mediator. While I have only mediated on a handful of occasions, I have been fortunate enough to shadow several experienced practitioners and watch them in action. One of those is Stephen Ruttle QC, who recently spoke to the firm as part of our ongoing series of 'Faith at Work' lunches. Stephen talked powerfully on the topic of mediation from a Christian perspective and had an enraptured audience from start to finish.

Having worked as a barrister and later as Queens Counsel for the first half of his 42-year career, Stephen gave us some insights into his evolution from litigator to mediator and some of the factors that had informed that evolution. Chief among these was a realisation that the adversarial process left many of his clients emotionally drained and dissatisfied, irrespective of whether they won their cases or not. There had to be a better way.

Stephen became one of the first in his profession to practise mediation and has since conducted more than 1,500 mediations around the globe. He also set up a community mediation service out of his church in Wandsworth where his team have helped mediate hundreds of disputes and had a transformative impact on the local community. His Christian faith has been instrumental to his approach: he has been guided by the biblical call to peace-making and the belief that every individual is unique in God's sight.

Stephen emphasised the importance of mediation in the current geopolitical climate and the incredible opportunities open to those wanting to get involved. The coincidence of a profoundly polarised society on the one hand and a new generation of younger people who wanted to play their part in peacebuilding on the other made this possible. Quoting WB Yeats' 'The Second Coming' – 'things fall apart, the centre cannot hold' – Stephen referred to this new generation as 'social antibodies' who could play a crucial role in preventing the disintegration of society and help to restore community life.

While Stephen confirmed that conventional 'mediation' has been a successful alternative to litigation, he also referred to 'conflict transformation' as a further step along the mediation curve and the gold standard which he strives for in every case where 'conversation is no terror'. Here the mediator is more like a midwife, facilitating the birth of a settlement that is owned and nurtured by the parties. There is little difference in the actual process, but conflict transformation would result in the parties continuing their relationship after the mediation rather than simply settling and walking away.

He also referred to the Archbishop of Canterbury's phrase 'disagreeing well', which seeks to replace the false premise that disagreement can simply be removed. Rather, disagreeing well should enable us to approach conflict in a way that allows us to retain our primary colours by putting love for the other first and disagreement second. Looking ahead, he also told us about a pilot reconciliation project which he is working on with the support of the Archbishop. If successful, this would involve the establishment of peace centres throughout the UK to enable community mediation to take place on a much larger scale.

Stephen spoke warmly of the positive role that Bates Wells had played in promoting social regeneration and delivering solutions that change society for the better. He also encouraged us to get involved in the process of peace-making in any way possible.

Faith at Work: Buddhism

At another recent 'Faith at Work' lunch, Suryagupta Dharmacharini, Chair of the London Buddhist Centre, shared her personal journey to Buddhism, having grown up in a Christian family. Her presentation prompted interesting conversations among colleagues about issues including generosity, relationships and the respective roles of spiritual practice and belief in an individual's experience of religious faith.