

MEDIATION NORTHERN IRELAND

ADDRESS BY MR. JOHN COLGAN, CHAIR OF BOARD.

AT

THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE MEDIATION DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

MONDAY 21 NOVEMBER, 2005.

Your Holiness, on behalf of the Board of Mediation Northern Ireland, I bid you welcome here this morning. And a warm welcome, too, to Michael Longley, our distinguished patron. To both of you let me express our delight that you have graciously accepted our invitation to officially open our new premises on this, the 21st day of November, 2005.

Another of our patrons, Marie Jones, is also here this morning and for that we are thankful.

I should also like to welcome Fr. Laurence Freeman, leader of the World Community for Christian Meditation, who has travelled from Washington to accompany His Holiness during his visit to Northern Ireland.

And to all our guests here this morning, let me bid you all a hearty welcome and thank you for sharing this joyful occasion with us here.

This organization has been in formation for the past twenty years. It originates in the mid 1980s, when a group of people from various fields – Education; Criminal Justice; Social Work; Community Development; the Churches and the peace movement – came together to form an association for the development of mediation in Northern Ireland.

Sadly, a number of its founders did not live to celebrate this day. We think of people such as the social entrepreneur Peter McLachlin; the peace activist Sr. Christina O'Neill; the Quaker, Denis Barrett and the innovator in school mediation, Jerry Tyrell.

Happily, a number of stalwarts are present this morning and to you I pay a special tribute for your vision and hard work in the foundation years.

Your Holiness and distinguished guests, it is gratifying to observe how Mediation Northern Ireland has evolved over the years.

We have benefited greatly from the service of international volunteers, provided to us by the Brethren Volunteer Service based in Geneva; the Eirene organization from Germany and the Board of Missions of the Mennonite Church in America.

In 1992, the first professional member of staff was employed and today the staff team number 14, with 26 Associate Practitioners and a further 50 volunteers.

Mediation Northern Ireland is a practice-led agency. We believe in practising what we preach. Our various training courses are based primarily on approaches to conflict which are tried and tested by ourselves. We do not ask people to do that which we are not prepared to try ourselves.

As practitioners in conflict intervention, this organization has been no stranger to controversy over the years. This is because it has been willing to take risks and approach some of the most intractable issues that at times have overshadowed this society.

In the course of their work our staff have endured suspicion, mockery and cynicism and their capacity to absorb the negativity within conflict is a measure of their professionalism.

Over the past twenty years we have administered training to thousands of Northern Ireland's citizens, from all walks of life and in many and varied settings, ranging from churches to schools; from hospitals to prisons; across the divisions of the community and in the voluntary sector; in business and industry; among civil servants and a range of public bodies; in the criminal justice system and within policing.

The reach of Mediation Northern Ireland has been long and influential and I would venture that Mediation Northern Ireland has acquired a moral and professional authority across this society for its quiet and persistent efforts to contribute to peace and stability by developing the practice of mediation and associated disciplines.

The official opening of these premises today marks the start of another chapter in the evolution of our enterprise.

This is the place from which Mediation Northern Ireland will make its contribution over the years ahead.

It is a well-appointed building in which the staff are creating an ambience of peace and reflection.

I must thank those who have enabled us to purchase and renovate this house:

Andrew?

We have refined our sense of place in this society.

We are a mediation development agency.

In this respect we do not view mediation as our exclusive property.

Rather it is a skill and discipline which has been practised informally within our culture for generations and our task is to support our citizens in the exercise of its art so that mediation and positive intervention in conflict can become synonymous with Northern Ireland.

In the same way as the French have a reputation for fine food, the Italians for style and the Germans for efficiency, we have reason to hope that in the Europe that is emerging, our society will be looked to as a place of creativity regarding the management and resolution of conflict.

And I am proud to be a part of an organization which is to the fore in earning such a reputation.

This is indeed a day for celebration.

And it is a particular joy for me now to introduce to you His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.