Community Reconciliation and Transitions:
Overview for September AFF BET Meeting

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to set out a common frame of reference for discussing the work of AFF study groups (BETs) in the community reconciliation program area. The paper first sets out some overarching theoretical and practical considerations that help to attach specific meaning to the concept of "community reconciliation." The remainder of the paper examines what it means to look at this area through a "transitions lens," and discusses the value added by this approach.

AFF is particularly interested in reconciliation between antagonistic groups, mostly at the community level, rather than individual reconciliation themes or treatment of reconciliation at the national level. This paper draws on practices and theoretical analysis at various levels, including experiences in other countries undergoing political transitions. While there are important and specific differences that may attach to each situation, all are helpful in developing a greater understanding of the concept of reconciliation.

The paper concludes that, broadly, the reconciliation area can be described as a process through which parties in tension seek a more just and peaceful coexistence. Inevitably, this process involves overcoming obstacles to change or the creation of a new order. Work in this field is thus primarily <u>about</u> the transition process, whether at the level of individuals, groups, communities or entire nations. By studying work that has a reconciliation focus, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of qualities inherent in transitions as well as important insights into problematic assumptions that may sometimes underlie the otherwise benign reconciliation concept.

II. Giving content to the concept of "community reconciliation"

A. <u>Some general definitions of reconciliation</u>

The term community reconciliation is widely used, but not often clearly defined. Any attempt at definition of this concept is a complex undertaking. In fact, a study of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's impact on one community showed that residents of the area had very different ideas of what reconciliation meant. A common underlying theme involved building a relationship between groups or individuals, but the definition of that relationship differed depending on culture (even

within the community), particular experience of human rights abuse, position in political structure and personal circumstances.[1]

Each idea of reconciliation within that community reflected different value systems or understandings regarding social order and cooperation and implied distinct processes. One view was of reconciliation as moral conversion, in the sense of coming to appreciate that all people are equal as human beings under God; this required a process of reflection, humility, repentance and forgiveness. Another view held that divisions were caused by difference and thus, reconciliation sought to promote inter-cultural understanding through communication. A third viewed reconciliation as a building of a common ideology of non-racism, while a fourth emphasized the importance of reconciliation in reconstructing the relationships that made up the fabric of community by clearing up suspicions, fear and resentment regarding past actions and associations. According to the study's author, sometimes these different ideas co-exist comfortably and other times they compete and demand different strategies; moreover, different understandings of reconciliation may be a source of distrust.[2]

More than one expert in this area has recognized the difficulty of assigning a specific content to the rather malleable concept of reconciliation.[3] The Oxford English Dictionary defines "reconcile" as "to bring (a person) again into friendly relations…after an estrangement…. To bring back into concord, to reunite (persons or things) in harmony," while in the context of political violence, reconciliation has been described as "developing a mutual conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups."[4]

Generally, a call for reconciliation accompanies or follows upon severe tensions that affect the parties deeply. According to Dwyer, reconciliation generally appears as a response to tensions that may arise between differing sets of beliefs, between differing interpretations of events or between apparently incommensurable sets of values.[5] Such tensions interrupt the coherence of life and, when severe, the individual's or community's well-being may require that they be incorporated into people's "personal narratives," since for individuals at least, "self-understanding, understanding others, being understood by others and achieving a degree of coherence and stability in our lives matter."[6] Reconciliation brings that understanding, intelligibility and coherence. However, it does

[1] Monograph by Hugo van der Merwe, *The South African Truth and Reconciliation Comission and Community Reconciliation: a Case Study of Duduza*, published by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (Johannesburg, South Africa), October 1998, hereinafter cited as "van der Merwe."
[2] Id.
[3] Priscilla Hayner, UNSPEAKABLE TRUTHS: CONFRONTING STATE TERROR AND ATROCITY (2001), hereinafter cited as "Hayner"; and Susan Dwyer, *Reconciliation for Realists*, 13 Ethics & International Affairs at 81-98 (1999), hereinafter cited as "Dwyer."
[4] Hayner; and Louis Kriesberg, *Paths to Varieties of Inter-Communal Reconciliation*, (unpublished manuscript, 1998), hereinafter cited as "Kriesberg."
[5] Dwyer at 83.
[6] Id at 86.

not represent an elimination of tensions but rather an incorporation and accommodation of "these disturbances and challenges to its prevailing narrative of self-understanding."[7]

Reconciliation does not have one, static meaning; rather, a number of factors influence its nature and content. Kriesberg unpacks the concept of reconciliation by describing its various dimensions, some alternative paths toward reconciliation, different methods that foster reconciliation and the sequencing of these efforts.[8] While his analysis may lend itself to an overly formulaic approach, it serves as a useful tool for thinking about the pieces that make up the reconciliation process. He finds variation in the meaning of reconciliation according to three general factors: units and settings, dimensions and degrees, and symmetry. By "units and settings," Kriesberg refers to the parties and levels involved. Reconciliation occurs between individuals, peoples, officials, governments, families or other groups or combinations of them, in settings at variable levels that may correspond to country, region, city or neighborhood.

In this regard, Hayner notes that an important distinction must be made between individual reconciliation and national or political reconciliation. While a truth commission may be an important tool in advancing the latter, reconciliation on an individual level is much more complex and more difficult to achieve by means of a national commission. The question of units and settings requires consideration of relations between individual persons and the entities to which they belong and raises further questions such as whether reconciliation between groups requires that all members work towards it or whether there can be reconciliation between groups even where individually reconciliation is impossible.[9]

Reconciliation can vary in dimension and degree. According to Kriesberg, these aspects are played out along four dimensions of beliefs, in which members of formerly antagonistic parties may varyingly: a) uncover and truthfully acknowledge terrible aspects of what happened between them; b) accept with compassion those who perpetrated wrongs and acknowledge each other's suffering, though not necessarily forgive; c) believe injustices are being redressed and/or that policies being implemented will protect against future harm; and d) anticipate peaceful mutual security and well-being.

Finally, reconciliation may reflect enormous variation in terms of symmetry. Kriesberg explains that, in varying degrees, one side has suffered more than the other, plus each side is likely to contest the relative suffering of the other and view it differently.[10] Reconciliation is more likely to be equitable when the previous struggle yielded no clear victor and when conflict has been constructively waged and settled using a problem-solving conflict resolution approach.

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[7] Id. At 87-88.
[8] Kriesberg.
[9] Dwyer at 85.
[10] This idea is particularly relevant to some of the negative meanings given to reconciliation, addressed below.

B. The reconciliation process

There is generally uniform agreement that reconciliation is a process, more than a tangible or precise objective. Kriesberg defines it as the process of developing a mutually conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups but notes that even when such an accommodation is achieved, it may be temporary, requiring further accommodation after renewed contention to reach a new level of reconciliation. Or, as Boraine comments in connection with the South African experience, political coexistence may be an important benchmark of progress, even if the "Holy Grail" of reconciliation is not achieved.[11] Dwyer suggests that success may be simply reaching a point of mutual tolerance of a limited set of interpretations of events or beliefs.[12]

Hayner, dealing with the realm of political reconciliation, finds that the concept implies building or rebuilding relationships today that are not haunted by the conflicts and hatreds of yesterday. She suggests three questions as guides to gauging success in this regard: 1) How is the past dealt with in the public sphere? 2) What are the relationships between former opponents? Specifically, are relationships based on the present, rather than on the past? 3) Is there one version of the past, or many?

Dwyer notes that the reconciliation process can operate in both forward- and backward-looking directions, as parties confront the past in order to move on. Reconciliation can alternatively seek to restore things as they were or it can seek to promote or facilitate change, depending on the circumstances.[13] Boraine takes a similar view, characterizing reconciliation as a coming to terms with the past through accountability and restoring a broken community, serving to shift the focus to the present and the future.[14] "True reconciliation…occurs when a society is no longer paralyzed by the past and people can work and live together…."[15] It is a process that can occur in fits and starts and swing between improvement and deterioration.[16] Kriesberg posits that conditions affecting the trajectory of reconciliation include the nature of the outcome of the previous struggle; the changing conditions within each party in the relationship; and changing conditions in the external context.

Additional complexities arise upon considering how the process moves forward. According to Kriesberg, policies or methods that can foster reconciliation and accommodation can be: 1) structural, involving efforts at reducing inequalities, developing cross-cutting ties, fostering super-ordinate goals, creating human rights safeguards and even establishing mutually-agreed upon separation; 2) experiential, developing appropriate subjective feelings and ways of thinking needed to bring about and sustain reconciliation, through policies that give legitimacy to claims for justice,

[11] Alex Boraine, A COUNTRY UNMASKED: INSIDE SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (2000) at 347-48, hereinafter cited as "Boraine."
[12] Dwyer at 89.
[13] Dwyer at 83, 85.
[14] Boraine at 295.
[15] Id. At 342, quoting from a New York Times editorial.
[16] Boraine at 346; Kriesberg.

truth, retribution and well-being. These might include public trials, education, public ceremonies, parades, monuments celebrating shared identity, expressions of forgiveness, or institutionalized management of antagonistic conduct; 3) interpersonal methods, in which work is done on an individual basis, often in small groups and generally at the grass roots level, such as personal meetings between leaders from antagonistic sides, or special workshops with training for reducing inter-communal antagonisms.

Hayner points out that reconciliation is a very long-term process that can be encouraged by a number of different factors (in addition to time itself), including: an end to the violence or threat of violence; acknowledgment and reparation; binding forces (e.g. bringing opposing parties together for joint gain); and addressing structural inequalities and material needs. Boraine observes that reconciliation may require closing important gaps, such as the economic gap between advantaged and disadvantaged.[17] For this author, truth is also a crucial factor: "While truth may not always lead to reconciliation, there can be no genuine, lasting reconciliation without truth."[18] In a similar vein, van der Merwe notes that victims will inevitably experience reparations without truth as an attempt to buy their silence.[19]

Van der Merwe agrees that reconciliation is a long process, not an event: "People can not simply one day decide that they want to forgive and move on. They are not necessarily demanding vengeance. They are, at the same time, not simply willing to move ahead as if nothing happened. They demand to hear the truth and to be given time to consider it. There are often not willing to forgive unless the perpetrators show remorse and some form of reparation is offered."[20] He speaks of the importance of victim engagement in the process; attention to internal divisions as well as those between groups; and a recognition that the conflict must not be treated as a static thing of the past: it is only the way that people pursue their incompatible goals that has changed; the need for ongoing accountability is just as important for present activities as for past actions. For van der Merwe, reconciliation needs to be built from the bottom up; the particular shape and intra-community dynamics take on different forms, even when there are common dimensions all over the country.

C. <u>Some warnings about reconciliation rhetoric</u>

Because it is susceptible to a broad range of interpretations, the concept of reconciliation is easily misused and can call up negative connotations. Boraine offers several examples, including reconciliation that calls for forgetting or concealing; that urges acceptance of violence and injustice; or that preaches personal salvation at the expense of social action.[21] He also warns that individual reconciliation should not be read to mean that a country is reconciled.[22]

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[17] Boraine at 356.
[18] Boraine at 341.
[19] Van der Merwe at 18.
[20] Van der Merwe at14.
[21] Boraine at 361.
[22] Id. at 356.

The Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch recently called "reconciliation" impossible to define and "too contested an ideal on which to base policy."[23] While this overstates the case against using the term, it is true that "reconciliation" has operated in some cases as a "code word for those who wanted nothing done."[24] The danger that "reconciliation" can be misused in this way requires a close look not only at whether accommodations might be "equitable" or "symmetrical," as Dwyer and Kriesberg would have it, but whether they are in accord with important human rights standards. Dwyer warns that reconciliation is no guarantee of justice and one should not pretend it is the same as justice, but this is a tension that cannot be ignored.

Reconciliation may also be over-simplified or inadequately placed in context instead of reflecting its true nature as a complex and variable process. For example, it would be simplistic and in error to assume that knowing the global truth or even one's specific truth must necessarily lead to a victim's reconciliation with his or her perpetrators. "Forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation are deeply personal processes, and each person's needs and reactions to peacemaking and truth-telling may be different."[25] A realistic understanding of reconciliation is required. Dwyer recalls that reconciliation is a process whose aim is to lessen the sting of a tension, make sense of injuries, new beliefs and attitudes in the overall narrative context of a personal or national life. It does not "pretentiously masquerade" as making things good again. Reconciliation should not be touted as aiming at happy and harmonious coexistence of former enemies; if it is made dependent on forgiveness or emphasizes interpersonal harmony, reconciliation will fail to be a realistic model.[26]

The complexities of reconciliation, its existence at many levels and dimensions, can result in problems even when not spurred by ill intentions. Thus, policies that help reconciliation in one way can hamper progress in another; efforts to implement different methods may interfere with one another; and different persons and groups pursuing different strategies can work at cross-purposes and undermine each other. "To avoid either one-sided domination or recurrent destructive conflicts, a form of equitable accommodation leading toward mutual reconciliation is crucial."[27]

D. <u>What does community reconciliation work look like in the US?</u>

Efforts in the US that would probably be considered within the "community reconciliation" fold include mediation, conflict circles, community conferencing, and restorative justice, to name a few. In another vein but also under the reconciliation banner, are initiatives that seek reparations for slavery, call for truth commissions to examine US human rights abuses abroad, and propose that the government apologize for the State's past harms against Native Americans. As represented by the work of the

[23] Reed Brody, *Justice: The First Casualty of Truth?* In The Nation, 30 April 2001.
[24] Hayner, quoting Juan Mendez on Argentina.
[25] Hayner.
[26] Dwyer at 95-98.
[27] Kriesberg.

various community reconciliation BETs, these approaches to tension and conflict in communities mirror many of the elements mentioned above and fit into Kriesberg's analytical picture as methods for fostering reconciliation.

The BET H paper adopts a reconciliation discourse in an explicit fashion. The paper discusses restorative justice as a means to overcoming tensions and seeking a resolution or "healing" of frustration, anger, fear and the cry for retribution, whether between individuals or at larger community levels. This paper points to acknowledgment, accountability, restoring emotional and material losses and repairing harm, as important ingredients to reconciliation. Likewise, support for victims, bringing offenders back into the community, achieving systemic change, addressing fundamental underlying issues, problem-solving, attaining closure, fostering community safety and establishing channels for dialogue are cited as part of the approaches undertaken through restorative justice. This paper states that the goal of restorative justice is that of moving toward healing and peaceful coexistence within the community, and stresses the importance of community involvement in the process of doing justice.

Participation also emerges as an important element in BET F's study of addressing tensions in police-community relations. This paper emphasizes trust and confidence through communication. In terms appropriate to its subject, this paper outlines key concepts that parallel several of those identified as essential to reconciliation. These include efforts to understand the dynamic (acknowledgment and truth), involvement of key actors, accountability (through police oversight bodies), openness to scrutiny and engagement, dialogue around questions of tolerance and an underlying belief that change is possible.

BET G explores elements of process that are key to reconciliation, focusing on questions of how parties in tension might be "brought to the table" and how working on projects as a common endeavor may effectuate reconciliation goals even when not explicitly framed in that light. The idea of working together or exploring common core values is one of the structural mechanisms for facilitating reconciliation mentioned by Kriesberg and other experts in this area. BET G also describes an interesting debate around advocacy groups' use of consensus-building tools in pursuit of their own objectives. This question raises interesting issues around the advocate's role in seeking greater symmetry of accommodation and equitable solutions (as opposed to any solution) through dialogue.

BET E's paper adds to the array of interesting material compiled by the other BETs on conflict management and resolution and brings many theoretical points down to the level of practical application. This BET describes conservation-oriented and Native American projects that would work toward easing tensions with other interest or identity-based communities on the basis of opening dialogue and understanding differences, providing an opportunity to explore reconciliation issues in these areas. Efforts to obtain government apologies to Native Americans or to apply the logic of truth commissions to some of this country's past abuses, while stressing different parts of the reconciliation puzzle, present yet another type of reconciliation work for AFF's consideration.

III. Applying the transition model

A. Sorting out change and transition in the community reconciliation context

The Andrus Family Fund adopts Bridges' theoretical model for understanding transitions. While the term "transition" may call up ideas of slow, progressive change in a certain direction, Bridges uses the word to refer to the internal process by which an organism –whether an individual, institution or group—assimilates and moves through change.[28] Change is thus an event, defined by its outcome, while transition is a process. The underlying assumption is that the effectiveness of the change itself, as well as the degree to which opportunities unleashed by change can be exploited in a positive way, are directly related to how transitions are understood and managed.

Bridges' work on transitions has dealt primarily with individuals and institutions in the corporate world. The application of his model to identity and interest groups in tension within communities is both facilitated and complicated by the similarities between community reconciliation models and Bridges' own transition theory. As already discussed above, community reconciliation is attuned to the relations of individuals and groups that seek change or move through it in a process involving mutual understanding, accommodation and tolerance. In this way, community reconciliation work necessarily pays attention to elements that Bridges considers essential for effective change, but it also may make it more difficult to distinguish between reconciliation objectives and transitions, in the sense that the "change" sought may itself be a process of transition.

B. Framing the analysis appropriately

For this reason, in applying the "transition lens" to community reconciliation work, special regard must be had for how the change and transitions are understood and framed. For example, in the police-community context addressed by BET F, the desired change that sets the frame for understanding transitions may be described as a new dynamic of trust between the two main groups, reached through smaller changes that address mutual communication, understanding and accountability as between the groups as well as the specific conduct of both police and community groups. The transitions experienced by the community as a whole, by police and discrete social groups, and by individuals who make up those groups may be described in relation to any and all of these changes. Similarly, the restorative justice process advocated by BET H may be taken up as a change in the concept of justice; as a changed role for the community within that new concept; or as a change in the relation between victims and offenders. Transitions will be experienced by individuals, groups and the community as a whole in relation to any of these changes.

These examples indicate that the "units and settings" question for understanding reconciliation, as described by Kriesberg, is key to identifying both the relevant change

[28] See generally, William Bridges, MANAGING TRANSITIONS: MAKING THE MOST OF CHANGE (1991).

and its accompanying transition process. The transition issue can be framed in relation to the overall context, to a specific reconciliation method or policy and to the internal processes of any of the parties involved. Moreover, the observation that successful reconciliation at the individual level does not mean that reconciliation is effected at the group level, and vice versa, is equally applicable to transitions. The fact that attention is paid to transitions in individuals within a group does not necessarily equate to managing the transition of the group itself.

C. Applying the transition model to community reconciliation work

The Bridges model breaks the transition process into three stages: endings, the "neutral zone" and new beginnings. Despite the complications already noted, the questions raised in each of these three phases of transition are pertinent to the area of community reconciliation. As Bridges notes, the appropriate recognition of endings requires an explanation for why things need to change; a vision of the change; an understanding of what is finished and what is not and an acknowledgment of losses the change entails. It has been noted in the German context that, "Common grief (Trauerarbeit) can only be achieved when we know what to detach from; only through the slow detachment from lost object relations – to individuals or to ideals – can our relation to reality and the past be maintained in a reasonable manner."[29] The clearest example of attention to endings comes in the form of "truth commissions" (see BET E), but this principle is also present in BET F's emphasis on documenting and understanding a problem like racial profiling in order to get past it.

The neutral zone described by the Bridges model is a time when new directions take shape and people are open to new ideas, when temporary solutions or arrangements may be appropriate as an aid to transition, and when having an accessible and clear vision of the future can aid in both keeping a sense of direction and also in identifying problems that could lead to redefining proposed changes. This, according to Bridges, is a time for taking stock, but also for taking risks and finding creative new roles for the organisms (individuals, institutions, groups, etc.) undergoing transition. The process of community reconciliation, if it manages to reach this point, may establish or use temporary mechanisms such as mediation processes and community dialogue, to facilitate the navigation of this free-form phase of the transition process.

The new beginnings arising out of transitions through the community reconciliation process are not likely to be defined by a tension-free environment or newfound common identities, but they may well be signaled by the acceptance of a new dynamic for addressing tensions and a warming to new-found tolerance. As Bridges points out, the "arrival" at this stage of the transition process may be enormously varied across different groups, individuals or institutions, such that no clear markings of a new era are visible. Community reconciliation work is most likely to be engaged with the

[29] Lutz R. Reuter, *Political and Moral Culture in West Germany: Four Decades of Democratic Reorganization and Vergangenheitsauseinandersetzung*, in TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE: HOW EMERGING DEMOCRACIES RECKON WITH FORMER REGIMES, VOL. II COUNTRY STUDIES, Neil J. Kritz, Ed. (1995) at p. 67.

earlier phases of transition, and often a realistic view of desired change will be modest in comparison to the "Holy Grail" of a reconciled community. However, if attention is drawn to changes on a smaller scale within the reconciliation process, "new beginnings" may be apparent and signal progress toward larger objectives.

D. Challenges and value of the transition lens

The similarities of the reconciliation process and the Bridges transition model allow each to inform the other, such that the relevant considerations that derive from reconciliation theory are relevant to understanding the underlying transition process, while the conceptualization of transitions in three stages aids in understanding the reconciliation dynamic at any particular level. AFF's programmatic work in the community reconciliation area can benefit from both areas of inquiry and may help to develop these models further.

The complex configurations of the various stakeholders and the inter- and intra-group relations in community reconciliation work demand an analytical approach that simplifies and clarifies without distorting reality. To the extent that the transition lens can accurately help us understand the process by which groups and institutions and whole communities –and not just individuals—experience change, it can be a valuable tool for assessing the impact and prospects for reconciliation, and for refining a specific approach to change, suggesting a need for modifications in policy, mechanisms and even objects of change. The transition model may also help to reveal the reasons why some changes – including attempts at reconciliation-- fail or falter.

IV. Conclusion

The BETs explored several mechanisms for addressing the tensions existing at different levels within communities and, at least in the case of BET E, some broader political tensions that are susceptible to a community reconciliation approach. All agree that process is key in community reconciliation work; at the same time, the variety of issues and mechanisms explored by the BETs for implementing that process demonstrates the breadth of this program area.

An exploration of the meaning, complexities and pitfalls of "reconciliation" can assist AFF in analyzing and defining its mission in this program area as well as in identifying some "best practices." Likewise, using the "transition lens" to filter and understand the successes and failures of reconciliation projects will contribute to the development of the community reconciliation program.