

CASE STUDY ON “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Title:

Neighbours report an Evangelical local gypsy church for uncivil behaviour

Location:

This occurred in a local area which has high population density and has experienced a dramatic demographic increase in the past decade (it has 30,000 inhabitants, 12,000 of whom are foreigners. This has increased from 1,300 in 2000). The area is frequently mentioned in the news due to a combination of poverty, security and intercultural problems.

Approximate start and end dates of the mediation process:

May – September 2009. It has since been monitored regularly.

Actors involved:

Actors directly involved:

- **The church pastor;** the religious community brings together people of Gypsy origin (and which is known in Spain as the “Evangelical Church of Philadelphia”, referring to the Apocalypse). They worship six days a week, two hours a day and it includes music, preaching in an impassioned manner by the pastor and the outward emotional expression of the followers; also the elders (or moral references) of the community.
- **Neighbouring citizens,** owners of a bar located just underneath the church.

Other involved actors:

- **Local police,** who received the complaint and the town council who had to respond (by demanding certain changes? Closing down the place of worship?). Two departments were involved: the Department of Integration and Living Together and the Department of Town Planning.

Mediating actors:

- **The UNESCO Centre of Catalonia** – which has an agreement with this town council to aid in the management of local religious diversity and to act as mediator in cases of conflict with a religious component.
- The local police itself.

Key information relating to the background and context (before the mediation process):

For a long time, the neighbours of the church and owners of a bar located underneath the church had been disturbed by daily noise generated by members of the religious community before, during and after their services; as well as by the fact that they were leaving the stairwell and entrance to the building untidy and dirty, and double parking, etc. The discovery of a water leak from the Church and a recent celebration involving a large number of followers led them to the decision to report the situation and make an official complaint.

In past years, Catalonia has experienced very similar cases related to these churches of Gypsy origin or other Pentecostal churches with similar characteristics. When the church is unaware of, or ignores, the norms, there may be unequal criteria or incoherence by local administrations when applying rules whether this is before (when authorizing or not the opening of a place of worship) or afterwards (when allowing a place of worship to continue or closing it down), that often turns these cases into dead end situations where fundamental rights such as living a dignified life, security of life and religious freedom, end up seeming incompatible.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

The objective of the mediation process was to avoid the complaint ending in the closure of this place of worship and look for an alternative solution that, as well as preserving the rights of those making the complaint, did not discriminate against the right to religious freedom and worship of the religious community. The objective was also to prevent the situation from turning into conflict between the community and the neighbours, and between the community and the local council.

Brief description of the case and mediation carried out:

When the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia was informed of the situation by the Council's Department of Integration and Living Together, the first step was to visit those in charge of the church to inform them of the complaint and get a sense of their reaction. The pastor and the elder both reacted positively to the news, recognising the reasons behind the complaint. Regarding the problem of the water leak, they confirmed that they had already carried out the necessary repairs. Regarding the excessive groups of people and badly parked cars which had happened on only one occasion, they explained that it was due to a celebration that brought many people from all over Catalonia. They realised that this had slightly escaped their control and assured that this would not happen again. As for the question of the daily noise, they promised to try to minimise it. Finally, a meeting was organised between the church and the neighbours.

Before this meeting took place, the Local Police contacted the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia to explain that they wished to be present at the meeting and act as mediator. The meeting, therefore, took place with the Local Police acting as mediator and the specialised support of the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia.

The meeting took place and was a positive and cordial experience. The pastor was unaware of (or, tactfully, said he was unaware of) many of the details related to the behaviour of his congregation before and after the services, outside the actual place of worship. He apologised for what he recognised as "serious" problems and promised to first speak to the elders about the situation and ask, during the services, the congregation to behave more appropriately. Furthermore, a series of specific commitments were defined regarding reduction of the noise, for example, not using a microphone, lowering the tone of his preaching, reducing the music and ensuring that services finished more punctually, etc.

Assessment of the level of success in reaching the initial objectives:

A few days immediately after the meeting, the neighbors reported to Unescocat that there had been a considerable reduction in the noise level. Since then, Unescocat has monitored this situation including periodic meetings with the neighbors and those in charge of the church. Although with the passing of time, the level of commitment in the agreements has become more relaxed, the previous situation which provoked the complaint has never reoccurred. The church therefore is still open and functioning to this day.

Mediator resources used:

- Notification of the complaint face-to-face by the mediating actor: the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia. This manner is always less aggressive than receiving news by post.
- The constructive attitude of all actors involved especially the generosity and patience of the neighbours with their capacity to empathise. In a separate conversation, they declared themselves “atheists but respectful of everyone’s beliefs”.
- The moral authority of the ministers and elders of the church.

Hours of dedication by mediator(s), materials required, etc.:

Two meetings lasting two hours. Periodic conversations in person or by telephone for monitoring purposes.