2006-2007 Fall forum: "Migration"

Description and evaluation of this on-line forum

The **Network for Peace through Dialogue** has been engaged in an online dialogue since the autumn of 2006. This dialogue was the 4th in a series examining issues related to migration. The online dialogue is an attempt to broaden the conversations that occur through the Network for Peace through Dialogue's in-person "Living Room Dialogues." Participation is open to anyone who is interested and recruitment has taken place in the weeks leading up to a new dialogue session to get new individuals involved. Participants use GoogleGroups, a free online message board, to respond to one another.

The initial online dialogue in the fall of 2006 took place over three months. At the end of this first session, it was determined that two months was a better timeframe for the dialogue sessions and that future sessions would take place over an 8-week period.

This session began May 20th, 2007 and continued for nearly 4 months (with the last response sent on September 7th, 2007). Despite the general feeling that two months was best for an online dialogue, several factors caused us to lengthen this particular session. First, the time of the year during which the dialogue took place (summer) resulted in significant lag times between responses, resulting in a need for an overall longer time-frame. Second, a particularly interesting conversation began to develop towards the end of July, just as we had planned to wrap up the session. Rather than cut it off, we decided to continue the dialogue for another several weeks to allow this conversation to take place.

The topic of this dialogue was the connection between culture and migration. Specifically, based on previous conversations, we began by asking participants the following: "We would like to hear how, in your personal experience, migration has shaped/changed cultural norms. What elements of cultural heritage are lost when individuals migrate from one place to another? What elements remain? What factors contribute to these changes?

Participants and Participation

Participation in this dialogue differed significantly from previous sessions. A concerted attempt to recruit new members allowed us to add greater diversity to the group.

Impact and Future Exploration of Dialogue

An unexpected outcome of this discussion was the willingness of participants to begin thinking outside the realm of the online dialogue, thinking about broader cultural impacts, and asking, "Where should we go from here?" This point was raised by at least three participants:

One member talked about the groups involved in the *Why Dialogue* conference and how the increasingly connected network is changing the culture

Another asked, "Is it possible that we can create cultural change?"

And another acknowledged the importance of dialogue. "But opening dialogues permits me to learn from these issues in ways that merely experiencing these impacts could not. And in turn with that knowledge I can navigate these changes in ways that benefit the people around me and they in turn can make more interesting, more involved, and more aware decisions about how they deal with the new shifting realities"

Our long-term hope for the Shaping Our Future dialogues is that they will expand beyond the realm of the online and begin impacting communities aside from our small group of participants. Several comments from participants this session indicated that perhaps we are ready to support an outward impact of the dialogue, or at least that we are moving in the right direction. In response to our final question, asking about the prospects for future dialogue topics, one member replied, "How do we create a culture that recognizes, accepts and builds with 'the other'? How do we 'welcome the stranger?' How do we do this in our lives and in our work, even if 'the other' has different points of view than our own. I realize that this is one of the points of this group, which is why I joined and it might be helpful for us to give concrete expression to how we work on this in our lives and work."

In response to this, another said, "The question remains what are we going to do with what we have learned? It is good to acknowledge one another trials verbally but where is the action."

Finally, one member stated:

"As the famous scientific principle states: "A body at rest will remain at rest unless some outside force acts against it." This is called inertia… and then there is this statement or point of wisdom, We are not going to change unless the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing. Has our dialogue been action? What kinds of actions have participants been moved to as a result of this conversation? Does anyone see appropriate actions for us now?"

All three of these comments suggest that, while interested in continuing to engage in dialogue, the group is approaching a critical point where *dialogue is no longer enough*. This suggests that the Network for Peace through Dialogue should consider investing time and resources into

possibilities of supporting currently active dialogue members in leading dialogues in their own "real life" communities (as opposed to the online community we have created here).