



Is Peace Possible?

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. The winter 2008 dialogue was the 5th since the inception of the Shaping Our Future program, which 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 January 9th, 2008 and continued until March 6th, 2008, when the last response of the session was sent. The dialogue focused on the topic, Is Peace Possible? Unlike previous sessions, which began with specific questions and gradually led to broader discussions, we began this session with a particularly broad topic, based on the hope that initial responses elicited from the dialoguers would lead to a narrower, more focused discussion.

Participants and Participation

Our previous (summer 2007) dialogue session followed a concerted recruitment effort in which three new participants joined the dialogue. This (winter 2008) session focused on engaging those dialogue participants with previous experience participating in Shaping Our Future. The group also gained one additional non-participating member who received messages but did not actively contribute to the dialogue.

The table below lists our participants in the session as well as the number of contributions made by each one during the 2-month dialogue session timeframe. A total of eleven participants contributed to this dialogue, which included ten previous contributors and one dialoguer who joined the session part-way through.

Rather than having a continuous dialogue that takes place over two months, the session proceeded in "spurts" of dialogue that occur in 3-7 day periods and focus on different themes. As in previous sessions, the largest numbers of individual contributions were made by dialogue participants with close affiliations to the Network for Peace through Dialogue.

Engagement in High Quality Dialogue

One of the tenets of Shaping Our Future is our commitment to High Quality Dialogue as defined by Network for Peace through Dialogue Executive Director Virginia Dorgan. High Quality Dialogue requires active participation (our request to participants was that they would commit to two contributions per month) and includes the following components:

I. Responses which show an honest expression of one's own opinion

1A. Participants express their own opinion rather than talking about "them" or in universal truths.

1B. Participants relate a similar feeling or story to what has been said.

1C. Participants state different opinions in a non- threatening way.

II. Responses which show empathetic and attentive listening

II A. Participants paraphrase the others point of view.

II B. Participants ask clarifying questions

II C. Participants make statements recognizing the feelings of the other.

III. Responses which show an effort to understand the other

III A. Participants respond to others insights with questions, agreements or respectful disagreement.

III B. Participants do not try to convince others to change their point of view.

IV. Responses which show willingness to be transformed by the experience

IV A. Participants state what they have learned from others.

IV B. Participants acknowledge changes in their points of view.

IV C. Participants search for and acknowledge their own hidden assumptions

Other Elements of the Dialogue

In our previous report (on the summer 2007 dialogue), we discussed the fact that participants began thinking beyond the realm of the dialogue itself and voicing concerns about making broader cultural impacts. We hoped that the dialogue topic chosen for this session would lead to continuation of this discussion through conversations about how to make peace possible.

Questions about expanding dialogue did arise a number of times during this session, however, no clear headway was made in finding paths to expand our dialogue beyond the confines of the GoogleGroups forum and into the broader community. Interestingly, however, the final spurt of the dialogue session revolved around an appeal made by one member of the group for input on

how to prevent the spread of violence in his home nation. This appeal led to an outpouring of support by other participants in the dialogue group and an expression of willingness to take action. While the session did not end with a clear direction for action, either regarding the situation in Cameroon or otherwise, it is heartening to see that dialogue participants were so quick to respond under these circumstances. This suggests that Shaping Our Future has been, at minimum, successful in building an online community of dialogue participants who are attentive to one another's needs. Further sessions should build upon this existing community to expand the network of dialogue participants and the reach of the dialogue in circumstances.