

A Call to the Conflict Resolution Community

By Bridget Moix

This past August I attended for the first time the annual conference of the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR), a professional organization formed by the merger of the Academy of Family Mediators (AFM), the Conflict Resolution in Education Network (CRENet), and the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR). I knew little about the organization at the time and was curious and excited to be helping lead a workshop on the responses of Quaker and Mennonite groups to the tragedy of 9/11 and the Bush administration's continuing "war on terror".

Coming from the peace church tradition with a background in both peace advocacy and international conflict resolution, I arrived at the conference with a certain set of assumptions about who would make up the membership of ACR and what the focus of discussion in the conference would be. I imagined a broad, diverse network of professionals working across the spectrum of conflict resolution, from family and community mediation to state and federal dispute resolution to international conflict prevention and peacemaking. I assumed that such a group of experts and practitioners concerned with promoting alternative, nonviolent means for managing and transforming conflict at all levels would be as agitated as I was - and continue to be - with the direction of U.S. policy and the impending crisis of a possible pre-emptive war by the Bush administration against Iraq.

As I perused the conference schedule, though, I discovered that while ACR does indeed bring together an impressive array of scholars and practitioners in the conflict resolution field, there was not the focus on 9/11, the continuing war on terror, and the approaching attacks against Iraq that I had expected. Indeed, of the more than 220 scheduled workshops and discussions, I found only 7 or 8 on themes directly related to what I see as the most urgent issues facing the conflict resolution community in the U.S. Of those, there were only four which I would classify as directly related to the policies of the U.S.: one on the current state and future of Afghanistan, one which raised issues of possible future attacks and crisis negotiation but seemed to avoid approaching any sensitive political issues; and only two which openly suggested that the conflict resolution community has a voice in the policy

<http://www.conflictres.org/vol202/bridget.htm>

10/7/2003

debate on these issues (and one of those was the workshop, organized by the Conflict Resolution Center International, that I'd come to help lead). In a somewhat related vein but not overtly connected to 9/11 and the war on terror were two workshops on improving the conflict resolution capacity in the public policy arena, and one two-part session on advocacy and conflict resolution.

Where's the heat?

Admittedly, the conflict resolution field includes an extremely broad range of topics, and there are many important issues to be covered in such a conference - family mediation, ADR in the courts, environmental conflict management, training and research developments in the field, international peace processes, and on and on. Yet, given the heated debate alive in the media and the policy arena at the time of the conference regarding a possible preemptive attack against Iraq, the desperate need for voices articulating alternative means for responding to the conflicts our country and world faces, and the incredible wealth of knowledge and expertise gathered at the conference, I was disappointed at the business-as-usual attitude which I felt at the gathering.

Here were hundreds of individuals who worked daily to understand, analyze, interrupt, and reverse cycles of conflict and violence, gathered in one place at one critical time, with, it seemed, hardly anything to say collectively regarding the violence unraveling around them - through the administration's demonizing of enemies abroad, the targeting of certain communities and heightened restrictions on civil liberties at home, the dissolving of international law and renewed commitment to nuclear proliferation, and the rewriting of geopolitics around a new "us vs. them" attitude that only promises greater global destabilization and furthers the cycle of violence. I cannot help but ask, "Where is the voice of the resolution community in this war?"

CR is Always Political

In fact, I believe the broad range of individuals gathered at the ACR conference are deeply concerned with the direction our government's policies are headed. Yet, as a field, we seem to shy away from becoming "too political," as if conflict resolution work could in fact remain neutral. Yet, I cannot think of a more political field of work to be in. As I understand it, conflict resolution is about human relations, which is inevitably about conflict, which is almost always political! A profession that deals with people in conflict, striving collaboratively to find alternative ways for managing problems that can transform relations, resolve disputes, and move toward justice and reconciliation, cannot avoid politics. Perhaps it is time we as practitioners and scholars begin thinking of the field as indisputably political. Instead of avoiding the political arena, we could provide a powerful voice for peaceful resolution of

<http://www.conflictres.org/vo1202/bridget.htm>

10/7/2003

conflict at all levels of policymaking.

Workshops

I was intrigued by the workshop presented on advocacy and conflict resolution, working with practitioners to improve their skills at being advocates for clients in disputes. Moving between the worlds of advocacy and conflict resolution in my own work over the years, I've discovered a certain assumption that advocacy is not something conflict resolvers do. I've never quite understood the assumption, as conflict resolution, to me, has always been about advocacy - advocating for alternative processes for dealing with conflict without resorting to violence and in ways which can meet the needs of all and, possibly, transform relationships. In this way, the conflict resolution field, as an entity, is always involved in advocacy. We are not neutral when it comes to matters of violence and war. We believe and, through study and practice, have witnessed the possibility and power of nonviolent prevention, management, and transformation of conflict. These at least are my assumptions about the biases of the field.

Toward the end of the ACR conference, I was happy to find a group of ACR members organizing a petition supporting "the use of cooperative methods of resolving disputes that lead to better, longer lasting solutions and stronger relationships... [urging] the adoption of peaceful methods for resolving all disputes between the governments of the United States and Iraq." This was an important step toward finding a collective voice for the conflict resolution community amid the clamor of war. Similarly, the final speakers of the conference, outgoing and incoming presidents of ACR, made important points linking the field of conflict resolution practitioners with the world of politics and advocacy. "We need to be advocates, we should never be just neutrals about what we believe in," urged Arnie Shienvold in his final speech as ACR president, and the new president, Nancy Peace noted the role of the conflict resolution field in providing "a strong voice in affecting public policy issues that impact us."

Reaching consensus among such a diverse group as ACR on what the organization could and should say with regard to a pending pre-emptive war against Iraq, a spiraling global war on terror, and the fretting away of civil liberties and international law will not be an easy task. The debate itself will no doubt raise difficult questions for many and challenge the group as a whole. Yet, if ever there was a time to take up that challenge it is now. For the need for voices which can articulate, with experience and professional knowledge, the dangers of spiraling cycles of violence, of an "us vs. them" approach to the world, of seeking security for oneself through war against another, has never been greater. More than anything, policymakers in the U.S. and internationally need to be convinced that effective alternatives for dealing with entrenched and spiraling conflict do exist, that face-saving ways out of the corners we

<http://www.conflictres.orgivo1202/bridget.htrn>

10/7/2003

find ourselves in can be found, that our own security is linked inextricably to the security of our global neighbors and even our so-called global enemies. The conflict resolution field has the experience, the knowledge, and the compassion that is critically needed in the current political debate. If only it will raise its voice.

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10/7/2003