

**Ruediger Pusch**  
**Peace Be Among Us! A Peace-Seminar in Time of War.**



During the first seminar of the year 2006 the Lebanon War broke out. In fact the beginning and the extent of the war could not have been predicted, and I was very anxious whether our partner organisations would have enough participants for the seminars under these conditions. But not a single person cancelled.

There is only one possible explanation for this: In times of increasing tension at least some people from both countries wish somehow to make contact with “the other side” in a non-violent way. The number of participants in relation to the whole populations may be small, but it is not a question of isolated “traitors”, but rather of representatives of certain social trends. For those of us, who look upon the Middle East conflict with continual disillusionment, this is a moment of hope.

I was even more astonished to see, that the war did not influence in any way the content or the conduct of the seminar. Likewise in the Breaking Barriers seminar, which began a week later, the war once again played no part.

There might be several reasons for this. After more than sixty years of continuously fluctuating tensions or actual state of war, the decision to take part in a seminar with members of the “enemy” seems not a temporary whim, even if the seminar promises “vacation from war”. It will usually be pondered, rejected, discussed in a circle of friends and family, and in due time embraced. Such a decision, once made, is no longer so influenced by outer events, which in any case one must live with if one wishes to change them.

In this seminar two political organisations wished to try out possibilities of a future cooperation, which reaches across the divide. Explicitly they planned joint actions by students

from both sides against the wall. By focussing on cooperation more than on dialogue they were trying to avoid controversy. So this seminar developed very differently from the previous ones.

Normally the focus of our dialogue seminars is on the participants getting to know each other better and seeing the other side in a new light, so that fundamental attitudes can change. In most of our dialogue seminars, especially at the beginning of the meetings, there are a few participants who provoke the others by calling suicide bombers martyrs or by demanding the Jewish people to go back to the countries from which they came, or that the Palestinians should go back to Jordan.

These hate tirades are very difficult for us to bear, but only by allowing them do we fathom the depth of the participants' feelings and desires. If we place the emphasis on striving for harmony, then these aggressive impulses cannot be reflected or changed.

With this in mind we can understand why, during the Lebanon war, our participants spent hours in telephone calls, text messages and intensive researches on the internet, but this theme hardly arose in their national groups and not at all in the official part of the seminar. This was because the emphasis on consensus screened out strong emotions and conflicts.

The Israeli and Palestinian facilitators were not really satisfied with the outcome of the seminar, as far as I could see. It was not possible to commit the participants to a joint action. In spite of my critical observations on this seminar, which atypically focussed on action, the feedback round at the end of the two weeks was very positive, and I was particularly impressed by the way in which individuals described their change-processes.

(summery and translation by W.Dieter)