The Peace Current

Pax Christi USA
The National Catholic Peace Movement
Membership Newsletter, Summer 2022

50 YEARS
A 50th anniversary reflection

By Nancy Small, Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace

Following is an excerpt of the reflection offered by Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace and former national coordinator Nancy Small at the Pax Christi USA 50th anniversary banquet dinner on August 6.

When I was asked to reflect on the 50th anniversary conference theme, “Seeing Through the Prism of Justice,” the first thing that came to mind was a suncatcher. It’s a lovely type of prism, one that dazzles my days as it sends rainbows dancing across my kitchen floor. Like many people, I love the beauty of rainbows. But I love them even more because they remind me of the vow of nonviolence God made with humankind long ago.

We’ve all heard the story. After the Great Flood, God said to Noah, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen 9:11). Scripture goes on to say that the rainbow will be the sign of this covenant. God will behold the rainbow and remember “the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen 9:16).

What an extraordinary moment between God and Noah. The great flood cleansed the earth of all the violence that was harming it (see Gen 6:13). But the destruction it caused left God feeling remorseful. This was God’s “there’s got to be a better way” moment where God recognized the futility of violence and the fertility of nonviolence. Longing to restore right relationship, God promised never to do that again and made a vow of nonviolence with all creation through Noah.

How many times have we witnessed violence and said to ourselves “there’s got to be a better way” over the course of Pax Christi USA’s 50-year history? And how many times have we promoted that “better way” by making a choice for nonviolence in the face of violence? Each time we do, we are keepers of the nonviolent covenant God made with Noah. We are kindlers of the new creation that God’s vow of nonviolence ignited.

How have we been doing this? By advocating nonviolent alternatives and advancing nonviolence as a way of life.

For 50 years Pax Christi USA has been advancing gospel nonviolence by advocating its power as a legitimate alternative to violence. We’ve taken the hidden light of the Catholic peace tradition and reflected that light more broadly and bountifully for all to see. Now that light shines from the halls of the Vatican to the humble valleys where most of us live out our vocation as peacemakers by bearing the light of the Son of Justice, by being the peace of Christ.

Decades ago Pax Christi USA looked at itself through that prism of justice and recognized the need to form young adults in the ways of nonviolence. This weekend we are witnessing the vibrant and vital light of young adults who have assumed key leadership positions within Pax Christi. Now we have a national office staff that is comprised mostly of young adults. At the helm is Pax Christi USA’s executive director, Johnny Zokovitch, who came of age in Pax Christi and has done foundational work in forming young adults in the way of nonviolence.

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Please see the accompanying flyer included in this membership mailing and check out the website for the latest, most up-to-date information about the September 19-26 days of action for our Bread Not Stones campaign. You’ll also find a complimentary prayer card, A Prayer for a Federal Budget that Offers Bread, Not Stones, included in this mailing. These prayer cards are available online in the PCUSA store and can be used for your own individual prayer, group prayer and prayer services, actions in support of the campaign during the days of action, and throughout this ongoing campaign.

For the days of action, we’re encouraging individuals and communities to meet with your legislators between September 19-23, host a public action on September 24th and/or 26th, and conduct parish outreach on September 25th. For the public action, we are identifying two possible dates so you can adjust them to fit the setting and your group’s availability. If you're hosting a witness outside of a legislative office, we would recommend holding your action on a weekday. A toolkit of resources for small group use is available on the BNS 2022 webpage on our site.

Contact Lauren Bailey, National Field Organizer, lbailey@paxchristiusa.org, for more info or to get involved.

**Nancy Small reflection (continued from p. 2…)**

nonviolence. Let us celebrate tonight the light that young adults bring to the peace movement as well as what they see when they look through the prism of justice.

Over 20 years ago, Pax Christi USA looked through that prism of justice and recognized the need to examine and confront racism within our movement and acknowledge our complicity with racism in our society. This work has brought people of diverse colors and cultures into Pax Christi. Indeed, people of color are now assuming their rightful place in leadership roles at every level of the organization, enriching Pax Christi with their wisdom and witness as well as their deep spirituality and discipleship. Let us celebrate tonight the light that people of color bring to the peace movement as well as what they see when they look through the prism of justice.

Let’s celebrate, too, the light that each of us brings to Pax Christi USA. Each of us is a prism of justice that reflects the light of peace. How? By being refractors of the light of peace in a climate where there are many detractors of that light. By allowing the luminosity of nonviolence to shine through us upon a nation that longs for the light of a better way.

Sometimes I wonder why God chose the rainbow as the sign of God’s covenant of peace. Maybe it was to let us know that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said. And to remind us that just by bearing the light of nonviolence and being that light, we bend the arc a little more toward justice.

Or maybe God chose the rainbow to remind us that when we choose nonviolence, the sky is the limit. The reach of nonviolence is broad and wide, spanning the skies with possibility and promise. Nonviolence is fertile by nature, like the seed that is planted or the yeast that makes the dough rise. In our first 50 years, we’ve begun to explore the heights and depths of nonviolence and we’ve expanded its reach. We’ve cultivated nonviolent beginnings where violence and injustice have long reigned. We’ve promoted nonviolence with courage and conviction, planting seeds in the souls of more and more people. As we embark upon the next 50 years, we are ready to cultivate the leavening power of nonviolence as never before so that it might realize its full potential.

So tonight let’s celebrate the radiant light of Pax Christi USA in our lives and in the life of our world. Let’s celebrate the light of resistance and reconciliation with justice that Pax Christi bears, a light that is resilient and keeps on rising, reaching for ever greater heights. It is a light that is persistent and prophetic, a light that shines with the effervescent promise of brighter tomorrows.
Archbishop John C. Wester, from Friday’s opening keynote, the section titled, “What I have learned”

For a moment now, I would like to reflect on a few things that I’ve learned since we published my letter. I was speaking to an interfaith group of ministers in New Mexico and afterwards an African American minister said, “I’m glad for your letter but there’s no way I can get involved in that, because my people are struggling every day just to survive racism.” I was so moved by what she said, and I agree with her. I take note that Pax Christi has worked hard to fight racism and bigotry in our country, and we must continue to do what we can to dismantle white racism and resist white supremacy and fascism and build a more inclusive, more equal, more diverse movement and church and world. We remember our African American sisters and brothers who have been killed, such as Michael Brown in Ferguson; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; Breonna Taylor in Louisville; George Floyd in Minneapolis; the nine friends killed in the white supremacist shooting in the church in Charleston, South Carolina; the ten friends killed in the white supremacist shooting in the grocery store in Buffalo; and so many others. Part of our anti-racist work today means working for voting rights and civil rights for all; stricter gun laws to stop these massacres and all this gun violence; training our police in nonviolence methods to stop white police brutality; and of course, abolishing the death penalty everywhere.

The demonic spirit of white racism among Europeans that led to colonialism and imperialism hundreds of years ago and then the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and then the enslavement of millions of African sisters and brothers, followed by our civil war and then segregation and discrimination and the ongoing killings and massacres today — this whole history of racism is directly connected to nuclear weapons. The development of nuclear weapons was led by white people in an effort to dominate the rest of the world, and racism lies behind it all. Abolishing nuclear weapons and war is part of the work of dismantling racism. Likewise, if you care about ending pov-

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erty, you must work for the abolition of nuclear weapons because all the money that belongs to the poor for food, clean water, housing, education and healthcare and jobs is going directly to the rich people and corporations who build and maintain nuclear weapons. If you care about the earth, you must work for the abolition of nuclear weapons, because these weapons already poison the earth and prepare for the destruction of the earth. If we do not also speak out for the abolition of nuclear weapons and the real risk of killing millions of sisters and brothers, then we will not wake people up to work for the abolition of racism, poverty, war or environmental destruction and the end of all these structures of violence.

Someone once said to me, “Well, this is nice but there really is no hope.” I think we need to address this national despair. If you give up all hope, then you give up your faith in the God of peace or the risen nonviolent Jesus. With the God of peace, all things are possible. God does not want us to live in permanent despair and warfare. God’s will is that we disarm and live in peace. As Dorothy Day said, we cannot afford the luxury of despair, there’s too much work to do. ... If we keep at it, if we keep speaking up, organizing, taking a stand, and raising the issue, and leave the results in God’s hands, one day this vision of peace will become contagious. That’s how peacemaking works. Suddenly, the Berlin wall falls down peacefully; communism ends peacefully; apartheid ends and Mandela becomes president. We must keep the vision alive, and keep doing what we can, whether we live to see the outcome or not. We know that this is the right thing to do, to call for nuclear disarmament, racial and economic justice, environmental sustainability and a new culture of nonviolence. In small communities like Pax Christi, we can encourage one another not to give in to despair, but to keep on engaging in public action for disarmament, justice and creation.

Someone said, “Well, you’re just naïve, you’re too idealistic, you don’t live in the real world.” ... No, we are not naïve and nuclear war is not inevitable. Overnight abolition is unrealistic, but taking aggressive steps to build a global grassroots movement to push the nations of the world to abolish nuclear weapons is not only realistic and achievable but necessary and urgent. I think it’s very realistic to talk about nuclear disarmament and to call for it and work for it. We really have no other choice. ... Nuclear disarmament is possible and achievable as Pope Francis said; we just need the political will to do it, and that’s where we come in. We can mobilize and organize the nation so that this vision catches on. That’s probably the greatest challenge: the apathy we face, the false belief that we cannot make a difference, that there’s nothing we can do. That is exactly what the nuclear weapons industry wants us to believe; they want us to feel powerless so that they can continue to make billions off these weapons. But the God of peace calls us to stand up, speak out and work for peace no matter what. Together we are more powerful than we realize; we have people power, the power of truth and nonviolence...

Marie Dennis, 2022 Teacher of Peace Award recipient, from Sunday’s acceptance speech

Fifty years ago, Pax Christi USA was founded in an era enriched by:

- a series of brilliant, strategic, decidedly nonviolent campaigns toward racial justice that together shaped the civil rights movement;
- by the black power movement in this country and around the world;
- by the Second Vatican Council that at least began to open a few of the locked windows of the Catholic Church;
- by the grape and lettuce boycotts organized by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and the UFWA;
- by a powerful contextual theological genre, liberation theology, that was articulated by oppressed, marginalized and impoverished communities;
- by struggles for independence across Africa; for liberation across Latin America;

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• by an active and short-lived global response to the global food crisis, the oil crisis, the cry of the earth;

• by a movement committed to solidarity and accompaniment in the context of US proxy wars and dirty wars across the Americas

• by a peace movement that finally ended the Vietnam War; that struggled mightily for nuclear disarmament, for demilitarization of US foreign policy, for an end to enemy-making, for an end to the Cold War...

I could go on.

I am still asking what is the role of a white, middle class Catholic woman from the belly of the beast in response to these cries for justice and liberation. I knew 50 years ago and still believe that somehow I had to address root causes because I am responsible for so many of them; and that my lifestyle and location/where I spent my time had to be informed by the wisdom and experience of the people on whose backs I was standing every day — people at the peripheries, survivors of oppression, racism, economic violence.

Fifty years later, the struggle seems the same, yet it is radically different. And that difference fills me with hope – not thin hope, but rich vibrant, thick hope. I believe that we are on the threshold of a new way of being, a new paradigm, a new logic for life. What we are birthing will be closer to the beloved community; it will be anti-racist and socially just. It will be built on right relationships with each other & with the natural world. It will be richly, beautifully diverse and decidedly nonviolent. It will not depend on weapons of war but on right relationships, a commitment to inclusive human dignity and respect for the integrity of creation.

This new paradigm will be based on a completely different understanding of our place as humans in the whole Earth community — and a recognition that we are latecomers at that to a spectacular cosmic reality that we are just now (thanks to the Hubble and Webb telescopes) beginning to see. It will recognize that diversity and relationality are imbedded in the cosmos and essential to survival on this planet. And it will clearly identify and reject violence in all its forms: armed violence, physical violence, structural and systemic violence, gender and racial violence, cultural, ecological, economic, spiritual and psychological violence.

[Nonviolence] is more than pacifism; it is a spirituality, a way of life; let me say that again though you know it very well; it is a spirituality and a way of life, a new way of thinking. It is a potentially universal ethic that could guide the world, including in times of crisis, toward just peace rather than justified war; toward respect and inclusion rather than exploitation. And it is a proven, effective approach to deep peace seen through the prism of justice.

Pax Christi’s commitment is to a nonviolence that imitates Jesus’ way of life, but that is also challenged and shaped by the history and contemporary experience of those on the receiving end of war and racism and neglect and planetary destruction. As I said in the panel yesterday, it is not just not violent but is muscular and actively engaged in preventing or interrupting the violence that is imbedded in our culture, by the way we relate to each other, by the way too many in our society who have been and still are bruised, broken, killed by “the system” and by the way we humans treat the earth. And it is a nonviolence that energetically promotes just peace, the new story, the beloved community, the New Creation.
In 1972, the Church was in the midst of the high expectations and the happy confusion that was the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. There was great hope that the Church could really read the signs of the times and give an accounting of our hope in a world that seemed quite turbulent. The re-discovery of baptism as the fundamental sacrament for Christians and for membership in the Church produced a flurry of new opportunities for lay involvement in the mission of the Church and an enthusiasm for addressing the joys and sorrows, the struggles and pains of the world and becoming true servants in the world. There was an optimism that fed gospel hope, despite the difficulties and challenges. In 2022, we are living a moment in which Pope Francis is working hard to revive the spirit of that council and proposing a model of synodality, of walking together as brothers and sisters all, to overcome too many steps backwards in recent decades and the unfortunate feeling of standing still and being stuck in so much of the Church today.

As a Church it does not seem that we were sufficiently vigilant about those who were being excluded, about promoting the nonviolence of Christ, about challenging oppression wherever it was, about promoting equality and equal dignity among all our members. We seemed to be part of an institution living in fear, not heeding that most frequent admonition of Jesus, to be not afraid.

How blessed we are at this moment to have a pontiff who invites again to be bold, to take chances, to heed the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor.

... We don't have to wander very far to encounter the wolves: when Catholics are promoting the death-penalty and awarded for doing so, are eager for vengeance and retaliation, when we are willing to bless armaments but not some couples, when the voices of women are not being heard in the fights about abortion, when the institution cannot bring itself to say "Black lives matter," and when the self-proclaimed uber-Catholics insist that they know more and better than the pope.

The faith that is celebrated in the first and second readings was a faith that is bold ... willing to take risks based on hope. Abraham believed some pretty impossible things and he was rewarded for it. The leaders that we have celebrated in this conference believed in peace with justice, believed in a more just world, believed that our Church could help bring about a better society – but only by being faithful, and unafraid, and holding on to the simple values of the gospel instead of making excuses why security, protection, aggression and violence should be tolerated.

"Much will be required of the one entrusted with much," the Lord says. Dorothy Day knew that well, so did the Berrigans, so did Sister Dianna Ortiz, Bishop Walter Sullivan and so many of the people named in our own litany of saints. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be" is true for each of us just as it is for our nation that can spend $778 billion of its treasury on defense in a year.

As we celebrate this jubilee of Pax Christi, may we all be inspired by the wonderful image of God who is eager to welcome us to the table of his kingdom, sit us down and serve us. As we gather around this table today, may we recognize that same Savior serving us and commit ourselves to do what we can to bring more and more of God’s children to the table of the kingdom.

PHOTOS: Page 4—Archbishop Wester’s opening keynote; Page 5—Bishop Stowe presents the Teacher of Peace Award to Marie Dennis; Page 6—Holding up the cause of six African American candidates for sainthood, banners of each were featured prominently on the main stage throughout the conference; Pax Christi USA Ambassadors of Peace Janice Vanderhaar and Beatrice Parwatikar dancing at the banquet; Page 7—Bishop Stowe at the closing Mass; our opening night emcees Charlene Howard, Pax Christi USA National Council Chair, and Manuel Padilla, Pax Christi USA National Council member
On the line: News from Pax Christi groups around the U.S.

PC NM VIGILS FOR NUCLEAR ABOLITION

Pax Christi New Mexico continues to show up to a weekly Nuclear Disarmament Vigil in Santa Fe, sponsored by Veterans for Peace, Nuclear Watch New Mexico, and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. PC New Mexico (pictured right), along with other sponsoring organizations, also hosted a vigil in Los Alamos on the 77th anniversary of the bombings in Hiroshima. The chapter’s proximity to the Los Alamos National Laboratory is central to their work for peacebuilding. Los Alamos continues to be one of the most powerful hubs for nuclear weaponry in the U.S.

PC SAN DIEGO LENDS HAND TO DIALOGUE EFFORT

Pax Christi San Diego (pictured below) and St. James Faith in Action Committee provided and served a delicious homemade lunch and homemade cookies to fifty Hands of Peace teens and staff on July 20th, 2022. The Hands of Peace summer intensive 3-week program brings teens from Israel, Palestine, and the U.S. to dialogue and learn about the “other,” and be agents of change. This was a wonderful opportunity for us to be part of this Hands of Peace program and meet the teens and their chaperones!

PC BALTIMORE SUPPORTS BLM

Pax Christi Baltimore partnered with the Black Lives Matter Interfaith Coalition for a rally in remembrance of George Floyd on the second anniversary of his death. In the two years since George Floyd’s murder, the Black Lives Matter Interfaith Coalition has been hosting regular rallies for racial justice.

PC TEXAS REFLECTS ON UVALDE MASSACRE

In response to the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, members of the Pax Christi Texas board of directors wrote a statement about the urgent need to act in promotion of gun reform: “Pax Christi Texas, a Catholic voice for Social Justice, has responded to the recent tragic events in our country and calls for ‘common sense legislation.’ Echoing the words of Pope Francis and Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller and four chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we stand for legislation to address background checks and ban assault weapons. Not to act on this issue is a moral failure. Let us not allow time to dull our consciences. Many avoidable killings have happened and many more will take place without a national legislative change. With life and death consequences for many, especially young people, we ask our leaders to consider the urgency of this matter and to represent us by acting to limit gun violence...”

PC FLORIDA REACHES OUT TO BISHOPS

In response to Archbishop Wester’s pastoral letter, Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace, PC communities across the country have been reaching out to clergy with an invitation to join the work for nonviolence. Pax Christi FL recently did just that by sending the pastoral letter to every bishop in the state. In their accompanying letter, they shared about how, “In the coming months [PCF] will be using this letter as a means for prayer and study, leading to actions to help move our government towards a conversation on nuclear disarmament.”

PC GROUPS REMEMBER HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI

The 300+ participants in the opening session of the 50th anniversary national conference joined over a dozen local Pax Christi USA communities in observing the anniversaries of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Groups from Maine to New Mexico, the Pacific Northwest to Massachusetts, and nearly 100 conference participants who vigiled at the Pentagon on August 7th prayed, studied and acted for nuclear abolition in remembrance of the anniversaries.