

# Fighting for peace against knives, nukes and arms fairs

Pat Gaffney

Our most popular Christmas card reads: 'When the kings and the princes are gone, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart.'

People seem drawn to the message it proclaims, a reminder of what the Christmas feast is about and the invitation to bring 'Good News' to others in the year ahead. Now I have an opportunity to offer you a glimpse of the 'Good News' of Pax Christi and its work over the past year.

Making local and global connections – same struggle, different place – is an essential part of our peace work. Here is an example. In September I read an article in the *Evening Standard* lamenting the rise in knife and gun violence, a young man had been shot in East London. We have to get knives and guns off the streets, was their plea.

On the same day, no distance from where the young man had been shot, one of the largest arms fairs in the world was due to open at the Excel Centre in Docklands. The fair promoted itself as a place where 'battlefield tested' weapons would be on display. I responded to the article, pointing out that if we want guns off our streets, we want to get guns and weapons out of our cities too.

Imaginative community projects are being set up to challenge the knife and gun culture. One is supported by Pax Christi members in St Mellitus parish, North London. With their slogan 'Choose Life – Drop the Knife', they work with other faith groups and local police on a project to take weapons out of circulation.

Valerie Flessati, a group member, said: "We took part in a search for hidden weapons in a local park. Three knives were found and handed over to the police. The next step will be to raise funds for a knife bin to be installed on parish land. Provided by a Christian charity called Word4Weapons, hundreds of knives, and even guns, are apparently being deposited in them".

The initiative has wider aims, to make 'ordinary' good adults aware of the

scale of the problem and to create a new trend amongst young people that it's not OK, or necessary, to carry a knife. It doesn't protect them, but puts them in greater danger.

Other initiatives challenge the global arms trade, in particular the Defence & Security Equipment International (DSEI), mentioned above, which brought together arms companies, military personnel and government representatives from many states.

From around the country people took part in a week of action against the fair, this included a No Faith in War day, co-ordinated by Pax Christi. Catholics, Anglicans, Quakers and others came together for times of prayer and protest. During the day groups, including members of Pax Christi, blocked the road with their bodies and took part in a banner-drop from a bridge, both actions stopped lorries and trucks delivering equipment to the fair.

On the eve of the event an hour-long silent vigil was held outside the exhibition building, with over 150 people taking part, including some from local parishes, their first time at such an event. With their signs and leaflet distribution, the participants shared their concerns with staff and security personnel.

One month later two young Christians, Sam Walton, a Quaker, and Dan Woodhouse, a Methodist minister, were found not guilty of criminal damage after they were accused of breaking into the BAE Systems plant in Warton, Lancashire, with the intention of disarming war planes bound for Saudi Arabia that they claimed would cause unacceptable human suffering to the people of Yemen.

Public, non-violent expressions of dissent dramatise issues. The publicity and advocacy work that accompany them can raise questions about International Law and Foreign Policy, in this case Britain's role in selling arms to the Saudi-backed coalition currently mounting attacks in Yemen. They are acts of solidarity with communities way beyond our own borders. They attract people and amplify questions such as this, posed by Pope Francis in 2014, "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society?"

Did you know that there are 12 international organisations working



Peace is within reach for this toddler at a Pax Christi rally, while below left, demonstrators carry anti-nuclear placards

around the world to train and support unarmed civilian peacemakers? Did you know that non-violent civil resistance is twice as effective and is more likely to succeed than violent campaigns? Our work in the Catholic Non-violence Initiative (CNI) is gathering momentum, following a joint conference with the Vatican last year.

Pope Francis challenged us to "revitalise the tools of non-violence, and active non-violence in particular". Around the world non-violent activists are at the front-line of violence. Operazione Colomba, an Italian group, works in Lebanon to create safe zones to host Syrian refugees.

Aware of potential tensions between different Syrian groups and hostile responses from the Lebanese community, they worked to set up listening and dialogue opportunities to mediate flash-points and prevent violent conflicts. With a better understanding of the cause of conflict such projects can help defuse violence as a step to restoring community healing and cohesion. Another group SERPAJ in Mexico works with communities who live on the border with the US.

In Juarez City, working to challenge street violence, they organised 'community walks' in the streets of the neighbourhood trying to reach gangs of boys. They found that humour (using a street clown) helped to create a friendly, space, making their engagement less threatening and more likely to succeed.

To deepen the understanding and the power of non-violent engagement Pax Christi hosted a series of seminars in October with Maria Stephan, senior polity fellow at the United States Institute of Peace.

Maria with fellow academic Erica Chenoweth researched 323 conflicts and was able to show that non-violence was twice as effective as violence. Non-violent responses that include civil resistance, dialogue, mediation, negotiation, unarmed civilian protection and transitional justice she says, are grounded in the skills and legitimacy of those using them.

They encourage broad participation, so there is high personal investment in success. They are creative in the techniques and approaches they use, so are inclusive and communicate across cultural and religious divides. They protect and affirm life, in contrast to the destructive impact of violence.

Because of this, the peace is more sustainable and will strengthen democratic processes in post-conflict communities and countries. By contrast violent responses and wars

which leave injustices unresolved create human suffering and trauma, often sowing new divisions within communities. According to Maria, the Church, from the Vatican down, can play an important role in advancing sustainable peace globally by building strategic and tactical bridges between grassroots non-violent action and peacebuilding. The Church has the infrastructure; schools, parishes, universities, a Diplomatic Corps, a body of social teaching and more to offer – all we need is the will to release these resources to peacemaking.

Pax Christi has a long commitment to education for peace, recently celebrating 35 years of our Christian Peace Education Fund (CPEF) where we were reminded of some of the founding elements of the work:

1 To develop an understanding of the origins of personal, national and global problems;

1 The development of a critical attitude to contemporary conflicts so that young people can be well informed and able to make judgements on the basis of moral values;

1 The development in young people of the abilities to affirm themselves and others (self-confidence), to listen respectfully, to communicate effectively, to build community by co-operation and to resolve conflicts constructively rather than destructively

One Trustee, John Williams, reflected that this is a 21st century statement, pertinent to all involved in education at every level, pre-school, primary, secondary and adult.

Since 1982, the CPEF has provided grants to more than 120 projects, enabling small, grassroots initiatives to take off. Projects such as peace gardens in schools and parishes, often in deprived areas, that create spaces for quiet time and reflection, for mediation and a chance to learn about the language and skills of peacemaking.

Peace Trails, such as those in London and Cambridge, had been created that celebrate people and stories of peace and social justice in communities. The CPEF supports Pax Christi's own education work.

Matt Jeziorski, our education worker spends an average of 40 days a year in schools, reaching around 3,000 students through workshops and seminars. Resourcing teachers is an essential part of his work, from lesson plans that meet the needs of GCSE students to assemblies that explore the lives of peacemakers or respond to current crises, such as the bombing last spring in Manchester. New work is under way to offer Catholic spirituality

INSET days for teachers. All of this work contributes to the formation of conscience, exploring the Christian vocation to peacemaking.

Young people too are a witness to the 'Good News' of peace. Ella Holliday is one example. Ella from St Bede's Catholic High School, Lytham, recently received the Jimmy Mizen Award for peace and solidarity, (part of the Celebrating Young People Awards) for her work as a Young Peace Journalist.

Ella undertook training with Pax Christi International and then interviewed Mohammad, a 22-year-old refugee from Aleppo, Syria. Ella is also a school Anti-Bullying Ambassador and proposed to her school governors that the school become a Pax Christi School.

Most recently we have the 'Good News' of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Holy See was one of the first States to sign in September. Sadly our own Government has refused to participate in the negotiations or to support the treaty.

For years NGOs, faith based movements like Pax Christi International and coalitions we are a part of such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, (ICAN) have highlighted the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons and nuclear testing and questioned the morality of maintaining power through fear and threat. This painstaking and persistent work finally brought 122 countries to the UN in New York to agree on a treaty. In November Pope Francis issued a message that bring a shift-change in the Catholic Church position on deterrence.

He said: "We cannot fail to be genuinely concerned by the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices. If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of an error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned."

This was at a Vatican hosted conference on nuclear issues. Pax Christi attended as did ICAN, who have been awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for their exceptional work on coalition building in support of a nuclear weapon ban.

Pax Christi – Peace Sunday is being held on 14th January 2018 and celebrates the World Peace Message of Pope Francis: Migrants and Refugees: women and men seeking peace.

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