Theresa says Hello

Greetings to Pax Christi members and supporters. You may be interested to know something about me before I officially take up the role of Director of Pax Christi.

I live in Leicester where I have belonged to the same parish since I was a teenager. I have been married - for an alarming 30 years already! - to Luigi who I met at a parish youth group meeting when I was sixteen and he was nineteen. We have three lovely sons.

I have been working in NHS hospitals as a speech and language therapist and manager, although I started my working life as a teacher. Outside of work, I’ve always been involved in peace and social justice activities, often initiating parish activities and events myself. More recently I have led a busy parish Justice and Peace group. I have been driven by a deeply-felt desire for peace and nonviolence since being a shy teenager, growing up in mainly Catholic schools. I picked up John Hershey’s book Hiroshima from the school library and was so disturbed by it that it really has shaped my life.

I feel so deeply for those enduring violence and injustice, that the enormity of the change that is needed can feel overwhelming sometimes. One of my sons made the decision to join the armed forces a few years ago. Following his progress there is giving me a window into the military world now, which is both useful and painful. I have appreciated finding like-minded people in Pax Christi, within the Church, and outside the Church too. Years ago, I didn’t realise that there are actually many people who share values of peace, justice, nonviolence and upholding the dignity of each person. I am so excited that my ‘day job’ is going to be working for peace with Pax Christi. I have admired Pat Gaffney for years, never imagining that I might be looking to fill her shoes one day. Well, actually, I’ve said I’m aiming to fill just one of her shoes to begin with! I also never imagined that I would give up speech and language therapy, but I guess my drive for peace continues to shape my life.

I appreciate the words of welcome, good wishes and promises of prayers, already received from some members. Thank you. I am looking forward to all the challenges ahead and to building productive relationships with members and partners. I like meeting new people and learning new ways of doing things. I think there are lots of effective ways to work for peace, and all are needed!

Theresa Alessandro—who will join the Pax Christi team on 4 March for a month’s induction working alongside Pat Gaffney.
1 April 1990: the day my contract with Pax Christi began. 29 years on, I am still here (how did that happen?) but preparing to move on and create space for some new thought and energy. This article takes a long view of our work over this period, of changes within the global and domestic arenas, and in technology. Our movement has undertaken so many challenges with a spirit of ingenuity, flexibility and faithful persistence to Gospel peacemaking.

1990 was a good time to come on board. Talk was of a Peace Dividend. With the Cold War behind us, new opportunities were unfolding for economic and social growth. Spending on defence would decline and investment in arms conversion would follow. The Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp had helped to get rid of cruise missiles. Pax Christi’s valiant East-West group, coordinated by Peggy Attlee, having worked towards one Europe, was prepared for the new challenges of creating a common home. In the summer of 1990 our British section of Pax Christi hosted in Clifton Diocese an international ‘route’ for young people, with the theme, Let’s build a Europe of Peace. Sadly, many of those hopes crashed on 2 August when Iraq invaded Kuwait and what was to become a protracted war in the Gulf and Middle East began. Goodbye peace dividend.

Meanwhile, we kept a watching brief on developments around Trident. Peace activists and theologians reflected on the morality of nuclear weapons. Support for the annual Ash Wednesday witness grew, moving beyond London to Liverpool, Cambridge and Scotland. We organised a Christian lobby of Parliament on Trident and produced resources for the 50th anniversary of Hiroshima to revive awareness and campaigning.

Through our international links, and in partnership with the Catholic Institute for International Relations, CAAT, and TAPOL, an organisation promoting human rights in Indonesia, we became a member of the Stop the Hawks: No Arms to Indonesia Coalition, opposing the UK’s role in supplying arms that were used to terrorise the people of East Timor. We supported nonviolent action against British Aerospace, including the BAE Ploughshares in 1993 and the Seeds of Hope Ploughshares women in 1996. We held a joint lobby of Parliament, vigils and campaign events. Around the country members engaged in solidarity actions with students from East Timor. Our then president, Bishop Victor Guazzelli, gave great support to all of this work. In 1996 I visited East Timor and was able to experience the deep meaning of solidarity: sharing accounts of these UK peace actions and bringing home stories of hope and nonviolent resistance by the East Timorese. Hosting the Pax Christi International Council in London in 1997, we invited Fr Domingos Soares to come from East Timor and receive the Cardinal Alfrink Peace Award, along with Maria de Lourdes Martins Cruz, in recognition of their work for peace.

If the start of the 90s brought hopes of a peace dividend, 1998 brought hope for Northern Ireland with the Good Friday Agreement. Pax Christi’s Northern Ireland group had been working for years in partnership with Pax Christi Ireland and others – building bridges, creating volunteering opportunities, speaking out about the abuse of human rights and more. Fresh approaches to ‘winning the peace’ were called for and we organised a conference in 1998 on the theme Reconciliation and the Healing of Memories and in 2001 Northern Ireland: Reconciling a Divided Community.

Formation in peace and nonviolence has always been a priority for Pax Christi with support from the Christian Peace Education Fund, established in 1982. We co-founded and subsequently facilitated PEN, with its annual conferences all through the 1990s and early 2000s. We developed training within other institutions including the Missionary Institute London where we helped initiate an MA in applied theology: The Peace &
Justice Mission Studies programme. We have run courses in active nonviolence with the Conference of Religious, students in pastoral ministry and chaplains, and St Ethelburga’s Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. Throughout the 90s we worked ecumenically with the Churches Peace Forum producing resources and workshops for the World Council of Churches’ Programme to Overcome Violence. We contributed to the powerful training scheme arranged for the Jubilee Year 2000 by the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) and have co-hosted three annual conferences with NJPN on peace-related themes. This accumulated experience underpins our current work on nonviolence with the Vatican.

A constant in our outreach and education has been Peace Sunday. Since it began in 1967 Pax Christi has played a unique role in amplifying the World Peace Day message through homilies, prayers, discussion questions, children’s activities, giving every parish in England and Wales the opportunity to celebrate the theme and deepen awareness of the peace teaching of the Church.

Writing now in the eighteenth year of the ‘War on Terror’, I recall work initiated in 2002 by theologians and members of Pax Christi who produced the Declaration on the Morality and Legality of the War Against Iraq. Gathering the public support of hundreds, including prominent church leaders, we were thrust into the limelight of national TV and press. That declaration helped to create a critical momentum around the country casting grave doubt on the war. We heard that Downing Street was fed up with these outspoken Christians. With CAAT and other Christian groups we launched the Called to Conversion message that, though called to be peace-makers, as a nation we sow the seeds of war. We devised petitions, tools, liturgies, which enabled groups to engage in arms-trade campaigning with various government departments over several years.

After years of global polarity which saw security framed almost exclusively in terms of military strength, we began to consolidate our approach. With the Fellowship of Reconciliation we produced Security for the Common Good - a document arguing the case for redirecting money away from military defence, nuclear deterrence, the arms trade, and towards investment in human, sustainable security. We became a key organiser of the annual Global Campaign on Military Spending, providing a dedicated website and popular campaign materials. These encouraged people to take to town centres, cafés, schools, government departments, and stimulate political debate by offering ‘people’s budgets’ that prioritise education, health, climate change over military spending. With the Network for Christian Peace Organisations (NCPO) we developed this approach in several General Election briefings and, more recently, briefings on Trident and the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty.

In 1999 Patriarch Michel Sabbah became Pax Christi’s International President at our world assembly in the Middle East. Taking part in delegations and organising visits to Palestine opened new partnerships with Palestinian and Israeli peace groups. The Separation Wall was being built, along with other ‘facts on the ground’ that made daily life for Palestinians impossible and enshrined the illegal occupation of Palestine. Our support for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (which led to several members becoming volunteers), campaigns such as People need Bridges not Walls, and the Week of Prayer for Palestine and Israel, have allowed us to become a voice for our partners and engage in education and advocacy work. One gift of this partnership is the Pax Christi ICON of Peace, created in Jerusalem, presenting stories of peacemaking and reconciliation across time and many traditions. Since 2004 the ICON has been exhibited in British cathedrals, schools, prisons and parish churches - an inspiration for prayer throughout the ‘100 Days of Peace’ surrounding the 2012 Olympics, and at the 2018 Eucharistic Congress.

Through the great communication shift - websites, Facebook, Twitter, online shopping, e-newsletters - our message today reaches a much wider national and international community. Providing sound alternative news, advocacy tools, accessible education resources, notice of events and campaigns, reports about the work of members - this has become a priority for us. At the same time we produce high quality ‘paper’ resources, from study packs to seasonal reflections, assemblies for schools, Peace People stories, postcards that celebrate women peacemakers or spread the message, No More War, Let’s Build Peace. Let’s not forget internal developments, the move to Hendon in 1998, several changes in staffing, new systems for data-management and accounting. The unfailing support of our President, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon, our members and volunteers - all contribute to the wonderful service that our small staff team offers to the Church and the peace movement.

The words and gestures of Pope Francis affirm our work and encourage us to be even bolder in future. The arms trade is ever more aggressive. Technologies are shifting to the dangerous world of automation, drone warfare and killer robots. Financial investments still support the weapons’ industry and unjust structures in Israel and Palestine. Our young people are increasingly vulnerable to knife and gun violence. We face these challenges in our national context and, through the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, work with the Vatican to address the deep roots of violence, to forge a new moral teaching and practice. The potential of the Church to be a model and a powerhouse for active nonviolence is immense. Our task is to build a community of peace people who will help release this power.

Pat Gaffney—Pax Christi General Secretary 1990-2019
Friendship and resilience in Palestine

Back in December I had the opportunity to visit Israel and Palestine with a friend. It has brought me not only a deeper commitment to the issues that affect the country but also a great love of the Palestinian culture and people.

Having spent a hectic day and night in the beautiful old city of Jerusalem we boarded a bus to Bethlehem, which today forms part of what is known as Occupied Palestine. As we got off the bus and the rain began to pour, the great dark towers, gates and ‘separation’ walls surrounding Bethlehem became visible for the first time. I was quite surprised how large and menacing they were - far worse than I had imagined seeing campaigning materials and posters.

I was extremely privileged during our visit to meet Usama, a Bethlehem local who works with WIAM (The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Centre). He explained to me that the Occupation was not only an occupation of people’s land but an occupation of people’s freedom and the erasing of the very history of the Palestinian people. Usama related his own experience of coming up against these daily violations of international law. As we walked through the Aida Refugee Camp I found myself speechless at the reality of the injustice inflicted on these people and now staring me in the face.

Walking through the narrow streets of Bethlehem in the days ahead I sensed the devastation and conflict, but this was mixed with a deep awareness of the love of God at work in the brokenness, and the certainty that hope would win out. It was a great source of hope and joy when I was invited for lunch with the l’Arche community, whose imaginative wool felting products we promoted last year. The place resounded with joy and laughter and keeping this project alive was for me a real sign of Palestinian resilience. I was also delighted to meet at last another of our partners, Joseph Giacaman, and his wife Mary, who run a beautiful olive wood shop in Manger Square.

Daily demolition of people’s homes and land, not to mention the denial of human rights, access to basic health care and education continue. It is for us in Britain to educate ourselves about the situation, to petition government and to show solidarity.

Peter Hickey—Publications and Membership

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### Diary

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>23 February</td>
<td>Aylesford</td>
<td>‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice’. A day retreat led by Pat</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Gaffney of Pax Christi exploring the link between peace-making and building justice</td>
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<td>in today’s world. 10am—4pm at Aylesford Priory, ME20 7BX</td>
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<td>6 March</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Pax Christi Liverpool Ash Wednesday witness to nuclear war preparations. Meet the</td>
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<td>Whitehall Gardens at 3pm and process around the Ministry of Defence. Organised by</td>
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<td>Pax Christi, Christian CND and London Catholic Worker.</td>
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<td>6 April</td>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>Pax Christi Liverpool film show Of Gods and Men with discussion. 10am—4pm at Centacle Retreat House, L5 6TW. Admission free. Details: <a href="mailto:JanHarper1@yahoo.co.uk">JanHarper1@yahoo.co.uk</a></td>
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<td>27-28 April</td>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>National festival on Commemoration, Conflict and Conscience. Looking at hidden</td>
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<td>stories of the First World War including the conscientious objectors. Talks, films,</td>
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<td>exhibitions, performances. Details here: everydaylivesinwar.herts.ac.uk/ccc/</td>
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<td>18 May</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Pax Christi annual gathering.</td>
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<td>10.30—4pm. Maria Fidelis School</td>
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<td>Drummond Crescent, Euston, London, NW1 1LY</td>
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Please send me information on

- Membership □  Resources □  Legacy □

I enclose a donation of £ …… to support your work

Name: …………………………………………………………………………………………….

Address: ………………………………………………………………………………………..

Pax Christi, St Joseph’s, Watford Way, London NW4 4TY

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### Pax Christi—Our Values

Pax Christi members live by the biblically inspired values of Peace, Reconciliation, Nonviolence. These values are supported by the witness of peacemakers down the ages and the experience of the Pax Christi community.

Pax Christi is rooted in Catholic Christianity but is open to all who are in sympathy with its values and work.

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