



Pax Christi International

By Marie Dennis

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A closed door dialogue between civil society actors from Israel and Palestine -- a conference on conflict resolution in the Democratic Republic of Congo based on experience in Ituri and Kivu -- a series of trainings on peace, reconciliation and respect for human rights for the Pax Christi network in the Great Lakes region of Africa -- trainings for young politicians in Macedonia -- dialogues between Serbian and Albanian youth in Kosovo and between youth from Kosovo and youth from Northern Ireland -- courses in preventive reconciliation using the principles of Aikido in the Philippines -- international youth seminars on topics such as peace-building, organizational management and media awareness -- "peace week" initiatives, many of them annual, in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, UK, the African Great Lakes region, Kosovo, Russia, Croatia, the Philippines and Colombia -- exchanges of experience between civil society from the Middle East and from Central Europe on their role in bringing about non-violent social change -- training courses on non-violence in Lebanon and Jordan -- more than 30 years of dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church ...

Pax Christi's work for peace at a grassroots level around the world may be less visible in the United States than its opposition to the war in Iraq or to the development of new nuclear weapons, but these activities and thousands of others like them around the world and in the U.S. are part of its strength and shape its vision. Pax Christi USA, for example, is well into a multi-year anti-racism strategy and in the past two years facilitated a collaboration with twenty other national Catholic organizations to articulate the challenges of peacemaking in the 21st century.

Pax Christi is an international Catholic peace movement founded in France in 1945 by a lay woman, Marthe Dortel-Claudot, and a Catholic bishop, Pierre-Marie Theas, who had been arrested by the Gestapo for speaking out against persecution of the Jews, to promote reconciliation between the French and the Germans at the end of World War II.

Pax Christi now includes member organizations and partners in 53 countries on five continents, with over 100,000 members worldwide. This global presence is reflected in the composition of the Executive Committee with members from South Africa, Italy, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, the Netherlands, Croatia, Colombia, Germany, Lebanon, Portugal, France, New Zealand, the United States, Belgium and Peru.

Pax Christi is an autonomous Catholic movement, in which members of the hierarchy, clergy and laypeople work together on an equal and democratic basis. In 1952, Pope Pius XII recognized Pax Christi as the official international Catholic peace movement. Its international presidents, elected by the membership, have included Cardinal Feltin from France, Cardinal Alfrink from the Netherlands, Bishop Bettazzi from Italy, Cardinal König from Austria, Cardinal Danneels from Belgium, and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah. In 2007 the movement elected its

first international co-presidents, Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and myself

Pax Christi International collaborates on a regular basis with many Catholic organizations and institutions, including religious congregations of men and women, conferences of religious, universities, regional bishops' conferences and their human rights offices, justice and peace commissions of dioceses, CIDSE, Caritas International, Catholic Relief Services, and with individual bishops around the world. We also work with a very long list of other faith-based and secular movements and organizations – internationally, regionally, nationally and locally.

As a Catholic movement and global network, Pax Christi International brings together people from many different backgrounds, cultures and faith traditions to make real their shared vision of peace, reconciliation and justice for all. Believing that religion should be an unequivocal force for peace and social justice, Pax Christi seeks to transform a world shaken by violence, terrorism, deepening inequalities and global insecurity.

Pax Christi's fundamental objectives are the prevention and resolution of violent conflict, demilitarization, denuclearization, the strengthening of human rights, democracy and international law and peace-building. We work for the transformation of national defense strategies and for a definitive end to trafficking in small arms and light weapons, the arms trade, the use of antipersonnel mines and cluster munitions and the production and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Pax Christi also seeks to increase the human security of people living in situations of violent conflict or post conflict and to make more visible the economic and ecological factors of war.

A "preferential option for non-violence" is essential to the vision of Pax Christi, but sharing fundamental values and ultimate goals does not mean that member organizations always agree on particular positions or strategies, given our different historical backgrounds and experiences, and the fact that we work in different contexts. The organizational decentralization of Pax Christi allows for significant creativity and autonomy at a local or regional level as national sections and partners respond to local yearnings for peace.

Pax Christi's efforts to foster a culture of non-violence, to nurture programs of peace education and training, mediation, reconciliation and non-violent action are central to our mission. Pax Christi combines activism with a strong spirituality, which is still inspired today by the original motivation of our movement, reconciliation. By developing a spirituality and theology of peace, Pax Christi seeks to insert moral and ethical principles on issues of war and peace into the public and political arenas

Core Pax Christi programs include:

Peace education – a lifelong process. We work with educators and students; produce many publications, reports and study materials for youth and adult groups; organize meetings and conferences, press briefings and training exercises for young people. Many Pax Christi groups, including several in recent years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, sponsor an annual "peace week," a week of organized activities aimed at raising awareness about peace issues around the world. For this work Pax Christi International was awarded the prestigious UNESCO Peace Education prize in 1983 and in 1987 was named by the UN as "Messenger for Peace."

Human Rights – to make the human rights treaties, addressing political and civil, social, economic and cultural rights, universally binding and to strengthen their effective implementation. We work to ensure the protection of the rights of women, refugees and asylum seekers, indigenous people, ethnic minorities and children. We also give particular attention to

conscientious objectors, victims and survivors of torture, the death penalty, truth and reconciliation commissions and the international criminal court.

Disarmament – Pax Christi works intensely to reduce and ultimately eliminate the production, trade and use of arms, including small arms, landmines and nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

Conflict Prevention and Resolution – We facilitate dialogue between opposing sides in conflict, provide training and trauma counselling, including for youth, for people living in post-conflict situations. Pax Christi recognizes the unique role of women in conflict situations – as those who often suffer the most, but who also contribute enormously to healing and reconciliation – and tries to nurture this role through training and public awareness programs.

Conflict and Development – To support the initiatives of our partners in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East we sponsor, for example, “development education tours” that enable our Southern partners to raise awareness about the links between development and conflict, to advocate for themselves and to create important links with civil society partners in the global North where many policy decisions and financial commitments affecting development in the South are made.

Inter-religious Dialogue and Reconciliation - Believing that religion can play both a positive and a negative role in terms of conflict, Pax Christi has always given special attention to inter-religious and interfaith dialogue. In 1974 Pax Christi International began an official dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church and helped, by doing that, to restore relations between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. Pax Christi also has a long tradition of co-operation with the World Council of Churches and was one of the founders of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

Youth Activities – For many years Pax Christi has encouraged active participation in the movement by young people between the ages of 18 and 30 interested in issues of peace and justice through programs of dialogue and exchange and a program of trainings and activities, including summer camps, international routes, seminars and retreats.

Advocacy - Pax Christi International has consultative status at the UN in Geneva, New York and Vienna (since 1979), UNESCO in Paris, UNICEF in New York and the ILO in Geneva. It is also officially represented at the Council of Europe and has regular access to the European Parliament, the European Commission and NATO. Through national sections in the US, EU member countries, Australia and New Zealand, Pax Christi has good access to national governments in the North and to their representatives in the intergovernmental organizations. We use all of this access to address in appropriate ways, most often in coalitions with other like-minded groups, the issues of concern to our members around the world

The member organizations of Pax Christi International (national sections and affiliated organizations) implement programs like these in their respective countries to build local membership, to raise awareness of local and global peace and justice issues, and to lobby on behalf of these issues to their local governments. The Pax Christi International Secretariat, with the support of the Executive Committee, coordinates this work of member organizations and represents their concerns to international coalitions and international intergovernmental bodies. Every three years Pax Christi International consolidates the work of the member organisations during its World Assembly.

The International Secretariat keeps member organizations informed about activities and positions of the movement through the “Newsletter/Courier” and electronic communication (e-

mail and web site). An e-mail version of the Newsletter, in English and Spanish, is distributed monthly, and in French, every three months.

The Pax Christi International website (www.paxchristi.net) is an excellent source of up-to-date information. Its archives contain hundreds of documents classified according to subject. A new version of the web site will be on line soon.

A growing number of organizations and groups from regions in actual or threatened violent conflict - or in transition to democracy - have approached Pax Christi International and its national sections to ask whether they could be involved in the activities and networks of Pax Christi. In response, we have developed a regional partnership program to integrate the contributions of these organizations and to enable them benefit from the international network and representation of Pax Christi International, as well as from the experience of other Pax Christi partners.

The regional partnership program expands Pax Christi's work and focuses on area specific peace-building and education, training and technical assistance, fact-finding visits and advocacy. Its goal is to create coalitions and to increase local networking and collaboration. An international conference or regional consultation is hosted by Pax Christi International regularly in each area, bringing together local, regional and international organizations to discuss the priorities in the region. Many partnering groups are small local initiatives and the topics they work on vary, but they all seek international support and co-operation. Most of them are Catholic, but ecumenical and interreligious groups have become partners as well.

Pax Christi sections in Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand collaborate with Pax Christi partners in the global South, working directly with them on a variety of issues. For example,

- Pax Christi Italy and Pax Christi Netherlands work with local partners in Sudan.
- Pax Christi Netherlands, Pax Christi USA, Pax Christi France and Pax Christi Germany work with local partners in Colombia.
- Pax Christi Germany and Pax Christi Australia work with local partners in Sri Lanka.
- Pax Christi Flanders, Pax Christi Netherlands, Pax Christi Germany, Pax Christi France and Pax Christi USA work with local partners in Israel and Palestine.
- Pax Christi Flanders, Pax Christi Netherlands, Pax Christi Austria, Pax Christi Luxembourg, Pax Christi Germany and Pax Christi Italy work with local partners in Southeast Europe.

Asia-Pacific

The first regional consultation of Pax Christi members and partners in the Asia Pacific region was organized in Hong Kong in 1991. Follow-up consultations have taken place regularly since then. The Asia-Pacific region is critically important to efforts to build a more peaceful world given the rich and diverse, multicultural and multi-religious composition of the area and the fact that many present-day conflicts are taking place there. The focal points of the region are interfaith dialogue, peace education, demilitarization and security, small arms, conflict prevention and resolution, gender equality, minorities, asylum seekers and refugees, human rights and democracy. Pax Christi has regional partners in Bangladesh, Cambodia, East Timor, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Taiwan.

Africa

After many years of engagement in Africa – for example, by Pax Christi Netherlands and Pax Christi Italy in the Sudan and the DR Congo – a consultation of African partners was organized in Pretoria, South Africa in 2000. Since then, Pax Christi networks have grown in the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region and Southern Africa and are beginning to grow in West Africa.

Pax Christi International is increasingly aware of the ravages of conflict in Africa, particularly Central Africa, Sudan and Northern Uganda. Challenged by the situation of suffering, injustice and armed conflict, the regional partnership program in Africa works for the participation of civil society in peace processes at local, national and international levels. Among the many issues in the region, Pax Christi is campaigning to highlight the demobilization and rehabilitation of child soldiers, to bring to end the proliferation of small arms, to establish full participation of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution and to provide training in conflict resolution and mediation. Regional partners in Africa are in Burundi, Cameroon, the DR Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa.

The Middle East

In the Middle East the first consultation of partners was organized to coincide with the International Council held there in 1999; several other consultations have followed, involving partners in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt.

As with so many conflicts, religion is central to the carnage raging in the Middle East. An important part of Pax Christi's peace-building work in the region is through inter-religious coalitions that bring together a diverse group working for peace through inter-religious dialogue, human rights monitoring and advocacy. We give special attention to youth, women and refugees. Pax Christi International was also a founding member of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program and has participated in numerous fact-finding delegations to Israel-Palestine.

Central and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States

Central and Eastern Europe remains an unstable region, with countries in different phases of political and economic reform. In some areas, there are smouldering cross-border conflicts that could escalate or be misused for political purposes. The presence of many small arms and light weapons is also a huge problem.

Pax Christi partners in this region work to build more democratic societies and avoid the rise of new conflicts through strengthening civil society, building trust, enhancing security, and engaging in the processes of reconciliation and continued dialogue. This regional partnership program focuses on a variety of approaches and levels of interventions: grassroots protection of human rights, humanitarian and psycho-social help to the elderly population and internally displaced persons, assistance to refugees on reconstruction of houses and their return, different cross-ethnic and inter-religious trust building measures, education and capacity building activities for youth, as well as political advocacy.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Pax Christi works with an extended network of partners, including Pax Christi sections or groups in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia.

In the Balkans, Pax Christi facilitated a process of dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, focusing on the role of religion in conflict and the need for reconciliation.

In the Russian Federation, Pax Christi International co-operates with partners in Moscow and St. Petersburg, promoting peace education, both through peace studies courses at the Orthodox University in Moscow and through supporting public peace weeks in St. Petersburg. The movement has also been active in response to the ongoing conflict in Chechnya and the human rights violations within the Russian army.

Latin America

For too many people in Latin America, life is a constant struggle for survival. Institutionalized violence, ongoing armed conflicts and deep poverty continue to plague Guatemala, El Salvador,

Brazil, Colombia, Peru and other countries. For children, the combination of routine repression, war and the lack of basic human resources is especially destructive and places them at great risk.

Pax Christi's particular concerns in this region are for the creation of more just social and economic structures, the right to land, zones of peace, kidnappings, ending impunity, working with families of disappeared and tortured persons and promoting the rights of indigenous people, children (including child soldiers), women, internally displaced persons, migrants and refugees. Pax Christi was invited to El Salvador by Archbishop Romero shortly before he was assassinated in 1980. Other Pax Christi fact-finding missions have visited Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, Brazil and Colombia.

Pax Christi's Latin American partners from Puerto Rico, Haiti, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia and Peru joined representatives from other peace organizations from across the Americas at the first Pax Christi International Latin American consultation in August 2007.

One of the great privileges of my life has been to serve as vice-president and now as co-president of Pax Christi International. This was brought home to me very forcefully not long ago when Pax Christi International, Pax Christi USA and Maryknoll sponsored a day of dialogue at St. John's University in New York. Entitled *Preemptive Peace: Beyond "Terrorism" and Justified War*, the consultation brought together Pax Christi International delegates from Pakistan, India, Rwanda, the Philippines, Tanzania, El Salvador and Palestine, with the Catholic community in the United States – Bishops, staff of the Bishops' Conference, representatives of institutions like Catholic Relief Services and the Conferences of Religious, university professors, theologians, missionaries, Catholic Workers and Pax Christi USA members. The purpose of the gathering was to further theological and ethical discernment around the just war theory, pacifism and nonviolent responses to terrorism and egregious human rights violations in these times. The exchange among the 70 or so participants was amazing and has initiated a conversation that will be ongoing in our movement, but by far the most important contribution was that of the Pax Christi International delegates, whose insights based on personal experience helped us wrestle with hard questions, and whose presence made me recognize once again the enormous richness of Pax Christi's global embrace.