

Contribution from Pax Christi UK to Rome Conference on Nonviolence & Just Peace

Offered by:

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Chris Cole is the founder of Drone Wars UK a small British NGO which undertake research, education and campaigning on the use of drones and the wider issue of remote warfare. Chris is a former Director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, co-ordinator of Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and a long-time member of Pax Christi. Chris has been imprisoned a number of times for nonviolent direct action against war and war preparations. He lives in Oxford with his wife, Virginia and their three children.

Valerie Flessati is a peace activist and peace historian, working chiefly with Pax Christi (also a former general secretary). To make nonviolence popular and accessible she has created peace trails/pilgrimages, peace history conferences, and shown the 'Force More Powerful' films more times than she can remember. Since the murder of a young parishioner in a knife attack, she has been involved in finding nonviolent answers to street violence in her area of North London. As Catholics faithfully campaigned to get conscientious objection endorsed by the Vatican Council, Valerie believes we can move the Church towards a firmly-declared 'Option for Nonviolence'.

Pat Gaffney has served as General Secretary of the British section of Pax Christi since 1990 and before that worked with CAFOD's development education team. As well as facilitating Pax Christi's adult education, outreach and campaigning work Pat has been actively involved in many forms of nonviolent witness and civil disobedience to war preparations in the UK, resulting in arrests and short spells in prison.

The context within which we work.

The UK is a highly militarised country. We have the world's fourth largest military budget. We are a nuclear state, looking to renew our independent nuclear deterrent. We are the 6th largest arms exporter in the world. We have recently developed our own independent capability for drone warfare. We have been a key 'coalition' member of various military interventions over the past 16 years and have particularly strong military and political links in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and Israel and Palestine in particular. We are deeply involved in the fuelling of war and conflict.

As well as projecting military force overseas, many UK citizens themselves experience violence that is related to poverty, exclusion and racism. This manifests itself in knife and gun crime, especially among young people or through acts of community or domestic violence.

A climate of fear is fostered, whether around the idea of terrorist threats or from the projection of 'the other', refugees and migrants, as threats to our way of life, economy and more. This cultivation of fear could lead to more communal violence and more militarised approaches to domestic security policies. The UK will soon be voting on whether to stay in the EU or leave. We face a dominant message that is turning inwards, "We're OK on our own."

Some of the ways in which we have sought to work for nonviolent change

Direct challenge to the culture of militarism.

- Working to reframe security, away from the dominant military model towards one that sees human security in terms of food, health, education, spiritual well-being, just and loving relationships. We have produced ecumenical briefings/teaching resources and a DVD, *Give Peace a Budget* on this and use the Global Day of Action on Military Spending as one tool to engage communities in critical thinking/decision making about priorities and budgets for war or for peace.

- Campaigning and advocacy work against policies of military violence e.g. the renewal of the Trident nuclear programme and the UK's involvement in and profiteering from the global arms trade from a moral, humanitarian and legal perspective. Our distinctive contribution to this is to promote CST and the words and messages of Pope Francis.
- Working with teachers/young people to help them resist the marketing of the armed forces in our schools and communities. We do this through workshops, talks, resources, cooperation with groups such as Veterans for Peace.
- Taking our vision, liturgy and prayer to places that prepare for war, such the Ministry of Defence, military bases, arms producing companies and arms fairs and exhibitions. This is another distinctive contribution which we offer, surfacing the language, symbols, direct actions that name, expose and confront militarism. In this way we keep alive and affirm the tradition of nonviolent witness and civil disobedience.
- Attempting to engage the Church/Bishops' Conference in all of the above, recognising that there is often a very ambiguous relationship between the Church and the military in the UK. An example of this is the role of military chaplains.

Education and formation in peace and active nonviolence.

- We have trained in and offered the *From Violence to Wholeness* programme, adapting it for use in the UK with the title, 'In the direction of nonviolence'. We produce resources that celebrate and promote the success of nonviolence including our brochure/exhibition, *60 Nonviolent Victories of the Past Century*.
- We seek out and promote the witness of Christian peacemakers in order to better understand the various approaches to peacemaking. For example, to explore the place of conscience and objection to war we use the life of Franz Jägerstätter and of Veterans for Peace today.
- To explore the place of nonviolent accompaniment in peacemaking we support and promote the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine & Israel APPI and Christian Peacemaker Team programmes in Palestine. Members of Pax Christi UK have been EAs who share their invaluable experiences on their return.
- We have worked with families bereaved through knife violence who have chosen to reject anger and revenge. We have been able to offer them some support and create opportunities for them to share their experiences with teachers and young people. We hope that this may avert street/youth violence, offering young people, their families and teachers skills and language to better respond to provocation and threats.

Moving forward

The time is ripe for some fresh thinking and an injection of hope, setting out steps and directions on how can we move into a new era in which "war belongs to the tragic past, to history"? (Pope John Paul II, Coventry 1982), and moving towards a "preferential option" for nonviolence.

This will require investment in teaching and formation programmes and resources for our seminaries, schools, catechetical teams and professional groupings such as scientists, journalists and so on.

It should be presented to society through the media and through public debate, in such a way that the Church clearly sets out its values and agenda.