



# Pax Scotia

## Issue 47

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## We CAN Make Leaders Listen

*Naomi Zoka from Pax Christi Flanders adds a dynamic voice to Pax Christi International's Disarmament Group meetings. Here she gives an insight into her first experience of a UN meeting and how civil society can bring about change.*

My name is Naomi, and I currently work as a security and disarmament campaigner for Pax Christi Flanders in Belgium. I joined the Pax family in August 2023, one month before graduating with my master's degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from the University of Antwerp.

When I graduated, I did not expect that three months later I would be flying to New York in service of Pax Christi Flanders to attend the second Meeting of States Parties of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the world's largest disarmament forum. It was an incredibly enriching experience, especially so early in my career.

Being less than four months into my first real job, I did not know what to expect from such a gathering, nor how I could contribute meaningfully. I had not yet had the privilege of seeing my civil society colleagues in action.

Understandably, many people are quite sceptical about such gatherings in "elite" forums. From the outside, it often seems like another excuse for individuals in high places to travel, meet, talk in circles, and call it a day. Up until last November, I shared that bias to some extent, especially regarding nuclear disarmament. After all, what nuclear state is truly considering disarmament right now? However, I believe this scepticism exists because many people are not familiar enough with the role of civil society.

Attending the MSP as part of civil society was an eye-opening and enriching experience. The side events were where much of the real progress happened.

I had the opportunity to meet and learn from experts and activists from all over the world. I witnessed my colleagues in disarmament in action and was able to learn from them, which significantly improved my own approach.

While I could elaborate on how personally enriching the experience was, I also want to highlight the crucial role of civil society in making a difference. In my opinion, civil society is what makes these types of meetings worthwhile. It is also the reason why some states decided to participate in the meeting. Civil society organisations work behind the scenes to hold their respective governments accountable and apply pressure to ensure actions that truly benefit the greater cause. Looking back, I probably should not have been so surprised considering that the TPNW, a landmark for international disarmament, would not exist without civil society. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) made this treaty possible through collaboration and relentless advocacy.

Even if some states still refuse to acknowledge that it is time to unite and eliminate these weapons of mass destruction once and for all, they cannot ignore such important gatherings. Whether they eventually attend or not, in the months leading up to the event, civil society around the world was knocking on their doors, making them listen, and ensuring they know that people are watching and that change needs to come swiftly.

The first time I witnessed the impact we could have on the leaders of our respective countries was quite literally 10 minutes before the start of the MSP. While I was waiting in line for verification, several colleagues informed me of Belgium's last-minute decision to participate. By that time, I had already given up hope and didn't think we had succeeded. With Belgium being part of NATO, I was not too surprised. After all, their participation the previous year happened under a lot of conditions. So, imagine my surprise when not only did they participate, but they also gave a statement.

It was at that moment I understood what our work meant and what we are able to achieve by letting our voices be heard. That is why I believe that any event that gathers civil society and allows them to be heard is of the utmost importance for our future. ***Because even when the leaders refuse to listen, we make them listen. And eventually, they stop just listening and actually start acting.*** Naomi Zoka



*Mike Mineter lives in Edinburgh, and says he is 'more-or-less retired' from computing for climate research at the University of Edinburgh. He is a member of the Iona Community, of the Caritas Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, and of "See-Pray Palestine", a Zoom-based group that for four years has met from 6:30 to 7pm on Tuesdays and Fridays to learn and especially pray for all in the land called Holy. Here he shares a very personal reflection on the situation in the Holy Land...*

## Stopping the genocide

Although I was wearing sandals and scruffy, it took very little thought for me to agree when someone said to me, "You are not the Messiah." I was anxious that however much I did to seek justice in Palestine/Israel it could not be enough. I was in a couple of networks that shared information about Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. We learn, pray and then take other actions. It still feels like bringing half a loaf and a fish tail to address huge need.

In October I saw a young child behaving like a child should – all wriggles and fun. Then I thought of those blown apart, those surviving with no living relative, those taken hostage.

At a ceasefire protest I met inspiring Jewish students, eloquent and taking a courageous stand, and thought of the Palestinian student, university destroyed, interviewed in Gaza City, "I used to want to be a doctor. Now I hope to die in one piece".

I went home to eat, and thought of those with imposed starvation and no water, those with no home to go to, those unable to walk for fear of snipers and drones. I recalled Israeli Defence Minister Gallant saying on 9 October, "There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed," showing that before violence tries to dehumanise another, it dehumanises the violent.

In October we thought, "Surely it

will end soon! Pressure on media and politicians must have effect!"

Then the days turned to weeks, the weeks to months. The occupation of land, of people and of a diminished distortion of Judaism by too many Israelis goes on and on.

I don't know how to navigate these valleys of despair and horror. I think they cannot but disorient us for we are not free until, from every river to every sea, everyone is free. When asked how they cope, a Muslim Palestinian activist's answer was, "I pray five times a day". A doctor who works often in Gaza answered, "I love life."

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si`* grounds us as sisters and brothers, part of Earth.

In May, perhaps self-indulgently, I went sea kayaking, seeking restoration from what a friend calls Vitamin Sea with the flow and dance on the water, passing wonderful cliffs formed over the millennia of grace, delighting in the songs of seals resting on rocks, and of birds from glorious woodland.

I chose to sleep in a tent. One hot day I tried to sleep. It is impossible in a tent when it's sunny – it keeps getting hotter. I thought of displaced people with no choice, no space to escape to, no support like water, bathrooms and food, and stuck in the hot sun, then in the cold nights when rain and bombs fall.

***How do we stop this vindictive genocide?***

### Challenging candidates at the hustings

This month we can use hustings to challenge candidates to end Britain's anti-Palestinianism - cutting UNRWA funding instead of arms sales, politicians' decades of ludicrous "support for Israel" when the peoples can only thrive if together – and endorse international law that must hold both Hamas and Israeli leaders to account.

Hope says do what we can, not because it is enough, but simply because it is right.

Midges driving me nuts reminded me that a lot of individuals acting with energy effect change. So we continue to learn, pray, act, raise awareness.

***God, give us wisdom to see where we can focus our energy in accord with your Spirit. May we see your grace act in the land we call Holy.***

*Mike Mineter*





# True peace? Impossible while racism continues

**Marian Pallister** is a writer, chair of Pax Christi Scotland, and founder of ZamScotEd, a charity that supports education of vulnerable children in Zambia,



Some years ago, the organisation I founded to support the education of vulnerable children was able to access funding for cultural exchange visits. We could bring youngsters from Zambia to Scotland and take Scottish teenagers to Zambia. I recall one young Scot speaking of their sudden awareness of being white in a Black society.

These days, I usually travel alone to catch up on the progress of the secondary school ZamScotEd initiated and I'm rarely aware of my colour until someone shouts 'mzungu' – 'white' – and I become conscious of being 'other'.

In Zambia that shout is usually observational rather than an insult or a threat. How different the situation is for people of colour in some areas of the world.

When I took *The Man Who Cried I Am* by John A. Williams (first published in 1967 and republished this year by Fitzcarraldo Editions) on my latest visit to Zambia, I became increasingly conscious of colour, of the colonial past, and the racist present.

Williams was feted in the 1960s as a star Black American writer. This book may have been responsible for him fading from best seller lists, as it misses no one in describing the racism experienced by most Black Americans in the first two thirds of the 20th century. The truth embarrasses and angers.

Recent incidents, of course, remind us that violent racism perpetrated by white on Black continues into the 21st century. The shocking case of George Floyd's death at the hands of police officers was no isolated situation. Figures released in June 2024 show that the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans is much higher than that for any other ethnicity – just one indicator of the deep-seated racism that Black Americans are subjected to still. But let's not kid ourselves that in the UK or Europe, we treat our brothers and sisters of colour with the respect and dignity that Catholic Social Teaching suggests we should.

*The Man Who Cried I Am* is not an easy read. The exposition of racism is layered with sexism, and the language is as blue as the Fitzcarraldo cover. The fictional story of Max Reddick, Black journalist and author, ranges across continents and while mainly targeting white American attitudes doesn't spare the colonialists who, having drawn boundaries that completely disregarded

historical allegiances, laid paths leading to some of Africa's biggest disasters.

If we are to think seriously about changing the degrading, demeaning, debasing speech and behaviours that continue to hurt – no, destroy – the peace of mind and the physical wellbeing of our Black and Ethnic Minority brothers and sisters, then surely exposing ourselves to some language not heard at polite dinner tables is a small price to pay for informing ourselves in order to seek a state of harmony.

On the plane coming back from Zambia in June, I watched a 2019 film called *The Killing of Kenneth Chamberlain*. Sixty years on from John A. Williams' exposé of the ugly face of racism, this film tells the brutal story of a 70-year-old Black man whose medical alarm accidentally goes off and brings racist white police officers to his door to check that he is 'alright'. Only one officer tries to calm an escalating situation, and as the title gives away, Kenneth dies after a couple of hours of harassment and police brutality. It is immensely moving, as is *The Man Who Cried I Am*, and I have become convinced that films and novels like these are essential eye-openers if we really do aspire to a nonviolent world.

Marian Pallister



## Our website

Blogs, podcasts, past and future events – these are all on our Pax Christi Scotland website. All newsletters are archived there. You can pay your annual membership fee on the Membership page and make donations. Please explore and share:

<https://www.paxchristiscotland.org>

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You can also make regular donations on our 'donate' page or by standing order - thank you.

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## YouTube Channel

You can find recordings of all our events at:

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# A Diary Date: Faslane, August 3

**F**aslane is the focus of the Scottish peace movement's continued campaign against nuclear weapons, and this summer will be no exception. The Scottish Bishops' Conference Justice and Peace Commission and the Church of Scotland have generously led the arrangements for a vigil on August 3, from 10.30am to 12 noon.

This is our chance to once again make our position clear: weapons of mass destruction not only have no place on Scottish soil, but should have no place in today's world.

Archbishop William Nolan and the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland will lead the vigil, and we hope that Pax Christi Scotland members will join with representatives of many other peace organisations from around Scotland.

Our presence is vital as we reinforce the message given by the Scottish Bishops' Conference since 1982 and by Popes as far back as 1963: nuclear weapons are not a deterrent, and it is immoral to possess and to threaten to use them.

The UK was the third country in the world to develop nuclear weapons, after the US and Russia. In 1952, the UK tested a hydrogen bomb in Australia, then 11 more were tested up to 1957. The damage done to indigenous peoples and lands was never recognised and is one of the contributing factors in formulating Clause 6 in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – that people and territory where such weapons were tested should be compensated and reparation made.

However, in 1960 what was called the Blue Streak project was cancelled. This was a nuclear missile system developed in the 1950s, but during development, it became clear that it was too expensive and too vulnerable to a surprise attack. The project was cancelled in 1960.

Instead, the UK signed up with the United States to remain a nuclear world player.

Today, there are nine 'nuclear nations', and threats to use nuclear weapons have been issued in recent months. £123,310.94p is spent every minute on weapons of mass destruction - money which could be spent providing us with clean energy and pay for the retraining of workforces leaving behind fossil fuels. It could be spent on a well-funded NHS, on social housing, on moving people out of poverty.

Bring your protest banners, or simply yourself. As Pope Francis has said, "...the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home. The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral." See you at Faslane...