

**What's Happening across PCUSA State and Regional Chapters:
A Report from the First In-Person Meeting since 2019**
by Rosemarie Pace

It was a very happy reunion of PCUSA State and Regional Chapters prior to PCUSA's 50th Anniversary Conference and Celebration at the Double Tree Hotel in Arlington, VA. Representatives from 14 chapters across the country spent Thursday afternoon, August 4th, and Friday morning, August 5th, 2022 sharing their accomplishments and challenges and learning ways to do even better.

Prior to the meeting, the representatives had been invited to complete a survey of their top challenges and most pressing social justice issues.

The resulting **challenges** were:

- Recruiting younger members
- Lack of racial diversity
- Lack of support from the parish or institutional Church
- Lack of technology skills and/or resources.

The resulting **issues** were:

- Racism
- Immigration and Immigrant Rights
- Environmental Issues
- Nuclear Disarmament.

Using those survey results as a guide, a small committee of Mary Hanna of Michigan, Nancy Oetter of Illinois, and Rosemarie Pace of New York State created an agenda that included an opportunity for each state or regional chapter to present both written and oral reports on some highlights from their areas as well as four focus sessions to speak directly to the four challenges identified above. Of course, we were also inspired by beautiful prayers that Nancy; Pat Ferrone of Massachusetts (presented by Fr. Rocco Puopolo in Pat's absence); Sr. Barbara Finch of Pittsburgh Area, Pennsylvania; and Sherry Simon of Little Rock, Arkansas prepared. And we had time simply to mingle and chat, meet new reps and rekindle old friendships.

For their reports, the planning committee asked chapter reps to answer five questions:

- What's worked for you?
- What has helped pull people in or piqued their interest?
- What have you done to maintain your membership?
- Have you had luck pulling in younger members and/or people of color? What have you done to expand diversity?
- Have you made in-roads with churches or faith groups?

Synthesizing and summarizing the responses reveals a wealth of information and a significant amount of overlap of ideas, options, successes, and difficulties.

What has worked:

Many respondents mentioned **Zoom** as something that has worked very well to bring people together from far distances, both for meetings and webinars. This was actually a gift of the

pandemic. Of course, **in-person meetings** also “work.” Other things that work include **e-newsletters, social media**, having a **website**, and **snail mail** for communication. For introducing new people to Pax Christi, **tabling at events, leafleting, getting letters in diocesan papers**, and extending **personal invitations** have proven effective in some cases, though not all. **Collaboration with other like-minded groups**, whether religious or secular, **co-sponsorships** and **endorsements** are very popular sources of successful endeavors. **Events** of various types: workshops; retreats; book discussions; speaker engagements, especially with renowned speakers; public witnesses (marches, demonstrations, rallies, vigils); observances of special days like Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Good Friday, and Hiroshima/Nagasaki anniversaries attract many people within and beyond Pax Christi membership. PC Metro DC/Baltimore has had success with **paid ads in National Catholic Reporter**, and PC Rhode Island had similar success with paid **bus stop ads** addressing such topics as nuclear disarmament. **Taking advantage of one’s location** is another factor for success. Metro DC has the advantage of being at the center of U.S. politics. Metro New York is in the shadow of the United Nations. **Choosing issues that are most relevant to where a chapter is** contributes to its impact. PC Massachusetts has “**focus persons**” to lead on different issues of interest, making it possible to cover several without overburdening any one member, but having a common issue like the Bread Not Stones **campaign** has also captured people’s interest and enthusiasm. Some groups engage in **service activities**, whether volunteering in food pantries, homeless shelters, refugee assistance programs, or the like. PC Michigan points out the benefit of having a **database** of a region’s members.

What has helped pull people in or piqued their interest:

Many of the practices identified above pique people’s interest and, consequently, pull people in. **Involving members in the selection of topics and speakers** for prayer, study, and action draws them in by giving them a feeling of ownership. Besides the events mentioned above, PC Metro New York has hosted **Peacemaking through the Arts** for many years. This attracts people who might not come to a liturgy or demonstration, but who will still be exposed to a message of peace and social justice, simply using a different medium. Many groups **honor Peacemakers** at celebrations that welcome their families and friends, along with members of the peace community. PC Michigan publishes **position papers** on a regular schedule; different topics appeal to individuals with different interests.

What has helped maintain membership:

Again, much of what has already been noted helps maintain membership. Keeping things **affordable**, making them **convenient in time and place** for in-person gatherings, and using **Zoom** when crossing the miles are also helpful. In general, communication is key. **People like to be known, asked, invited, involved, and thanked, as well as informed.**

What has helped expand diversity by age and race:

Several groups have **reached out to high schools and universities**. A few offer **Young Peacebuilder Awards** annually. A number of groups have tried to collaborate with **Offices of Black Ministries** or **predominantly Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous parishes or organizations**, but most report limited success. Relationships may not develop at all or they may be short lived. This is an area of particular concern and challenge.

Making in-roads with churches and faith groups:

This is another challenging endeavor for most regions. Efforts include **outreach to parish Justice and Peace Committees; letters to diocesan papers and directly to bishops or pastors; and announcements in parish bulletins, newsletters, or papers.** PC Metro New York (PCMNY) has offered parishes **weekly bulletin reflections** for many years and was a member of a **Council of Ecclesial Ministries** in the Archdiocese of New York also for many years. Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of NY has been a particular ally programmatically and financially, but this is very rare, if not unique. PCMNY also created “**Parishes for Peace**” and “**Religious Orders for Peace**” both to offer programs and to receive support, similar to PCUSA’s parish program. **Participating in ecumenical and interfaith exchanges** has actually been more fruitful than appeals to our own Church for many regions.

These reports reinforce the initial survey results that sought help with diversification and support from parishes and the institutional church; hence, three of our four focus sessions.

The first was on **recruiting younger members into Pax Christi.** Ryan DiCorpo, Co-coordinator of Pax Christi New York State and a member of the PCUSA Young Adult Caucus led this session with a seven-point plan outlined here:

- 1) **Wisely, Ryan began with Defining “young.”** He emphasized that our messaging needs to be adapted to that definition. Are we talking about high school students, 18-25 year olds, people over 30 or 35? For those still in school, Ryan advises starting PC chapters there. If helpful, set up meetings with appropriate school administrators or faculty.
- 2) **Broadcasting our commitment to diversity**—Ryan tells us younger activists want to be part of an organization committed to racial, ethnic, sexual, and ideological diversity among its members. We need to be offering them such an organization.
- 3) **Reflecting those we want to attract**—We need to highlight the efforts and responsibilities of young people already involved in Pax Christi to let them know there are people like them in the movement.
- 4) **Centering the voices of younger members**—Promote younger members to positions of leadership, tapping older members as mentors.
- 5) **Maintaining a commitment to being “catholic,” that is “universal”**—Assure prospective young members that there is no religious test to join Pax Christi. We’re all on our own differing journeys.
- 6) **Relating the work of Pax Christi to the daily lives of younger people**—Make explicit connections between such issues as nuclear disarmament, climate change, economic injustice, and racism and the lived experiences of young people.
- 7) **The need to take action**—Be sure prayer and study lead to action. As a movement, we must *move*.

Our second focus session was on “**Building Relationships with People of Color**” facilitated by Isaac Chandler, a former member of PCUSA’s Anti-Racism Team and the PCUSA National Council. Isaac dove right in with a question, “**How do you reach out now?**” That led to a plethora of responses, but certainly not an abundance of positive results. Some responses we already heard, but others were new: Different regions have

- ❖ had speakers of color
- ❖ connected with predominantly African-American parishes
- ❖ met with the Diocesan Office of Black Catholics

- ❖ twinned and networked with parishes in Haiti
- ❖ tried to organize Spanish-speaking groups
- ❖ planned an event specifically for Black Catholic Heritage Month
- ❖ adjusted how meetings are structured and run, and
- ❖ attended African-American gatherings.

Despite these efforts, we heard a variety of reasons why they may not bear fruit. Some people of color have explained:

- ❖ They don't feel welcome in the Catholic Church.
- ❖ They embrace traditional spirituality, not institutional religion.
- ❖ They don't see their day-to-day struggles reflected in Pax Christi's priorities.
- ❖ They see concern for conflicts in Europe like that in Ukraine, but not conflicts in Africa like that in Congo.
- ❖ They are reluctant to engage with Pax Christi because of Pax Christi's criticism of the military from which many have benefited in one way or another.
- ❖ New immigrants are wary of getting involved in anything that might jeopardize citizenship or permanent status.

Adding to that is the simple fact that **people of color differ among themselves**, and **we need to be sensitive to that**. There are economic, cultural, linguistic, and educational differences, among others. Latinx people are not the same as African-Americans, and Africans are not the same as African-Americans. Whether people came voluntarily or as refugees also influences their experiences and needs, as does whether they were born here or how old they were when they arrived.

Then there are those **regions that are vastly majority white**, for example Maine, and where the population of people of color is mostly Latinx farm workers who can't get licenses to drive or to use as ID, for example Wisconsin. Clearly these factors inhibit opportunities to build relationships across racial and ethnic divides.

So what to do?

- ❖ Don't give up. Keep inviting. Be allies. Be present.
- ❖ Allow time to build relationships; they don't happen with only one or a few attempts.
- ❖ Find ways to connect issues from the day-to-day struggles to PC priorities.
- ❖ Remember that Pax Christi doesn't have all the answers.
- ❖ Get anti-racism training and, if you've had it already, consider getting it again. Schedule PCUSA's anti-racism workshop.
- ❖ Critique nonviolence through a racism lens.

Our third focus session addressed the lack of support most regions receive from their parishes or the institutional Church. Tom Cordaro of Pax Christi Illinois, who has been involved in Pax Christi USA in multiple capacities, has worked in parish ministry for decades. His presentation, **"Connecting with Parishes/Institutional Church,"** provided an interesting history of the Church in relationship to Pax Christi, a history that has had its ups and downs reflective of the leanings of the Popes over those same years. Despite those ups and downs, Tom emphasized the centrality of parishes to the Church and the importance of parish renewal. He went on to the immediate matter at hand: making that connection between Pax

Christi and the parish. Tom stated that the most important decision to consider is whether **to try to start a Pax Christi group in a parish or to try to establish a peace and justice committee.**

Tom declared that the easier choice is to **start a Pax Christi group.** He explained that Pax Christi USA is an official part of the Catholic Church with 501(c) tax-exempt status. It is listed in the Official Catholic Directory; thus, Pax Christi stands on equal footing with such other Catholic organizations as the Knights of Columbus and the St. Vincent de Paul Society that might be part of a parish. Of course, the likely result will be that you will attract like-minded people with like-minded values, like-minded ambitions for the group, and so on.

The other option, **a peace and justice committee,** Tom indicated can be both more demanding and more difficult. It requires a long-term organizing strategy that may raise awareness about Catholic social teaching, but may also arouse controversy. Tom recommends starting by studying parish policies and procedures for establishing new committees. Having allies within parish leadership helps here. Then lean on Catholic social teaching to make your case. Tom made particular mention of the U.S. Catholic Bishops 1993 document, “Communities of Salt & Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish.” He then identified three roles of a peace and justice committee:

1. Facilitate and enable the parish to do its peace and justice work; don’t do it for the parish.
2. “Read the signs of the times” by listening to the concerns, hopes, fears, and dreams of the people, which *they* must apply to Catholic social teaching.
3. Teach people how to think as opposed to telling them what to think.

To accomplish these three roles, especially the last one, Tom encourages bringing in speakers with multiple viewpoints. Clearly, he believes this is worth the effort.

Our final focus session was quite different. Mary Hanna of Pax Christi Michigan provided us with a bit of a **tech tutorial.** She gave each of us a packet of tips to help us navigate the world of computer technology from hardware to software. Her tips included whys and ways to become a registered nonprofit; websites to create a database; places to go (on-line) for equipment and applications; things to know about Facebook, Twitter, and E-mail; where to go for free graphics and tools to make eye-catching posters, fliers, and social media postings; and sites to visit to build a good website.

Overall, our State/Regional Meeting was rich with invaluable information and even richer with remarkable people.