

Twenty-five Years after September 11th, 2001: A Reflection
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Although reference to this 25th anniversary of the 9/11/01 attacks is fairly ubiquitous, especially here in New York City, I hadn't really thought about it much. Then, Pax Christi USA invited some members to submit a 100-word response to the question of "the state and direction of Catholic peacemaking 25 years after that horrific and momentous event." I still didn't give it much time or thought partially because there was a very short deadline to respond, and how much can you say in 100 words or less? I found my 10th anniversary statement, updated it, and submitted, but then I started to reflect and remember. I pulled out the special edition of *Kerux*, the Pax Christi Metro New York (PCMNY) newsletter that we published very shortly after the attack, and then the next five issues as well. What a wealth of articles! I also found my original Statement which I wrote on behalf of PCMNY at the time and my 20th anniversary statement that I didn't even remember writing. I was Pax Christi Metro New York's very new full-time Director in 2001 and Pax Christi New York State's very new Coordinator in 2021. With all these stimuli churning up inside me, I felt the need to write and far more than 100 words. Forgive me.

The first thing I remembered was being home eating breakfast and listening to NPR. Suddenly the reporter who happened to be speaking about something, I remember not what, announced with some shock that a plane just flew into one of the World Trade Towers. He (and I) assumed it was a tragic accident, but my mother told me to put on the television, which I did. When I saw the second plane hit the second Tower, I knew it was no accident. Feelings became visceral. My mother and I were about to vote in the primaries after breakfast. I don't remember if we did, but I do remember driving under a beautiful clear blue sky and seeing in the distance smoke rising from where the Towers were. I also remember, back at home, getting a phone call from a PCMNY Board member who was working in Manhattan—I was in Queens. She could see the Towers from where she was. As she spoke excitedly to me, she announced in horror that one just collapsed. I was supposed to go into work after voting, but received another call from someone at Washington Square United Methodist Church where my office was. She advised me in no uncertain terms not to try to get into the office. As it turned out, I couldn't go back to the office for a week or two; I'm now forgetting which. Unless you lived in the area below 14th Street where my office was, it was totally off limits. Despite that, I longed to be there as if I could do more there than from home.

Fortunately, I was able to do some work from home and keep in touch with those at the Church. Almost immediately, I began writing the PCMNY Statement which condemned the violence, mourned the dead, prayed for the injured and their loved ones, praised the emergency workers, and reinforced our commitment to Gospel nonviolence. It also appealed to government officials and policy makers "to seek creative, nonviolent responses to the assault" and to "invest our resources not in war, but in ending ... injustice and oppression."

Our special edition of *Kerux* contained a variety of statements from family members of those lost to the attacks in New York and at the Pentagon, as well; appeals for peace; acts of heroism among survivors; and action suggestions. Our action suggestions included an offering of copies

of prayer services to anyone who requested them, attendance at a “Service for Peace and Justice” on the two-month anniversary, a vigil at the site of the Twin Towers in early December, and a Holy Innocents prayer service on the feast day. We encouraged participation in other vigils, rallies, and marches for peace and justice of which there were many. We encouraged schools and parishes to invite us to speak on Gospel Nonviolence or to schedule one of our nonviolent conflict resolution workshops. I remember speaking at Regis High School to very mixed reactions. We also promoted a Friday Fast from Violence for Peace, Shalom, Salaam. We recommended that people learn about Islam and support our Muslim brothers and sisters at their places of business and wherever they might appreciate safe accompaniment. Finally, we advised people to examine U.S. foreign policy and how other countries view it and to contact our own government and media to advocate for peace, civil liberties, and justice for all.

The “Service for Peace and Justice” mentioned above actually became “Lessons and Songs: A Service of Mourning, Reconciliation and Resurrection.” It began with what became a kind of anthem for peace, “Peace, Salaam, Shalom” by Pat Humphries and Sandy Opatow. Then the service led us through the stages of Sorrow, Anger, Confusion, and Conviction to Direction, Hope, and Rebirth. Each section contained readings from both scripture and a contemporary prophet of peace, song, and reflection. We were also moved by liturgical dance. The service concluded with the singing of “City of God” with the lyrics “may our tears be turned into dancing” expressing eloquently what we were all hoping.

As time progressed, several local churches and peace organizations formed a Nonviolence Action Committee which met regularly and implemented a variety of the suggestions above and others, as well. We organized a number of interfaith events and joined others. The Children of Abraham Peace Walks began not long after 9/11 in Brooklyn, initiated by Debbie Almontaser, a Muslim woman, and Rabbi Ellen Lippman. The Walks continued for years and inspired me to start the Flushing Interfaith Unity Walks in Queens, out of which developed the Flushing Interfaith Council.

September 11th continued to influence our work in a number of ways, whether in themes for our retreat, the Good Friday Way of the Cross, or Fall Assembly; choices of Peacemaker honorees; collaborations with fellow peace organizations; or other forms of our prayer, study, and action.

On the first anniversary of September 11th, 2001, PCMNY became deeply involved in the September 11th Vigil for Peaceful Tomorrows. It began on September 10th. Several of us slept in the PCMNY office that night to be ready to join an interfaith ceremony starting at 6 AM the next day. A Peace Walk that had begun in Schenectady, NY on August 25th arrived at Washington Square Park at that time. Walkers included Native Americans, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, and Christians. In the Park, they and we joined together in a circle to pray, chant, sing, listen to the beating of ceremonial drumming and the humming of a prayer bowl, and to stand in silence at the exact times that the planes struck the Twin Towers. It was a very powerful gathering of diverse people with one intention: Peace in the face of all the violence that erupted because of the 9/11 attacks.

Of course, one of the greatest outcomes of the 9/11 attacks was the war on Iraq. As that intensified, PCMNY became a regular presence at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, the U.S. Mission to the UN, and the Isaiah Wall, all near the United Nations; at the Times Square Military Recruiting Center; in City Hall Park; and outside St. Patrick's Cathedral protesting the war. We issued a Statement opposing the War with Iraq. We leafletted, e-mailed, phoned, faxed, and wrote. We met with then Senator Hilary Clinton to refute her support of the war and to demand support for the poor instead. Some committed civil disobedience. We prayed, studied Catholic Social Teaching, composed Lenten bulletin inserts inspired by *Pacem in Terris*, and provided writings from Church leaders on war and peace to parishes. I accepted a number of speaking opportunities in person and on cable television.

The overall outpouring of energy and action, the collaborations with countless individuals and groups, the spirit of unity of purpose, and the clear commitment to peace and opposition to the violent response of our government made this a very rich and strangely wonderful time. Here in New York City, which I dare say was hit the hardest on September 11th, 2001, the immediate and strong cry of "Not in Our Name" was outstanding. And I would like to believe it continues to this day.

So how would I really respond to PCUSA's inquiry about "the state and direction of Catholic peacemaking 25 years after that horrific and momentous event"? I'd say it lives on in all of us who continue to be Pax Christi. It lives on in the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative and the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence. It lives on in PCUSA's Working Groups and Young Adult Caucus. It lives on in the Ben Salmon No Just War Catholic Conscientious Objection Registry. It lives on in each and every state chapter and region and local group. It lives on in our websites, our social media, our public witnesses, our participation with other like-minded organizations, and our non-participation with the forces of evil that neglect or abuse our fellow humans and all of creation.

Can we do more? We certainly are not acting with the intensity of what followed in the first year or two after 9/11/01, but we are acting as we can in response to the current crises with the current resources we have. Perhaps some of what I recalled from those early years after 9/11/01 can inspire renewed strategies for action, or perhaps the time is ripe for new ideas. Either way—or both ways—I think the state and direction of Catholic peacemaking today is filled with hope and promise. Our greatest need is simply (or not so simply) more—more people to help us in the work, more resources to do the work, and more faith that God is with us as we move forward.