Negotiating a just peace under the rule of law is the strongest option for ensuring the well-being and security of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. This is the core of Pax Christi International’s policy towards the conflict. The policies of Pax Christi International should go together with some specific actions.

What are the “core issues”?

Palestine, a non-state without sovereignty, is still trying to reach a peace deal with Israel. Since the Annapolis agreement of 29 November 2007, committees from both the Palestinian and Israeli sides are still meeting regularly to try and hammer out a deal. But the prognosis remain dim, not least because any peace deal cannot be superficial but would need to address inter alia the “core issues” of Jerusalem, the return of Palestinian refugees and final borders. Achieving such radical metamorphoses on the political scene requires equally radical thinking by Israeli politicians who would need to re-visit their political mantras and sacred taboos. They would also need to dismantle a swathe of illegal Israeli settlements, address the
physical intrusion of the “separation wall” into pre-1967 Palestinian land and reverse the appropriation of water resources.

The additional irony is that whilst some politicians speak up the possibility of a peace deal between Israel and Palestinians, Gaza with its 1.5 million Palestinians is being hurled back into the dark ages with mounting unemployment, deaths resulting from a dearth of medical supplies in hospitals and blackouts from a lack of electricity and fuel supplies.

Call for a Culture of Peace

Genuine peace is not made solely by signing and implementing agreements between governments. It must be fostered, developed and implemented between the citizens of both sides. Negotiations are focussing on territory, borders, the status of Jerusalem, settlements, refugees and security. But they focus also on a culture of peace. A peace process occurs between nations, transferring them from a state of war between enemies to a state of peace between partners. Civil society should play its role in this. And it is necessary to talk with every one. All should share a common conviction that human dignity must always be defended. All of us are called, in our own condition and role in society, to collaborate in solidarity among human beings and peace in the region. No more words, action is urgently needed.

The Israeli & Palestinian conflict should be solved by peaceful means, based on mutual recognition and on the basis of two states for two peoples. The fate and future of these two peoples are linked to their ability to find a way to live side-by-side in peace – in two separate states. The occupation should come to an end and the wall demolished. The role of the Churches in this is crucial. In many cases, religious communities are the largest and best-organised civil institutions in the world today. Churches have local networks of parishes, social services and schools, in Israel and Palestine, and can reach many people. Churches and their leadership should teach the faithful (bishops and priests are not only preachers, they are first of all teachers), we call it peace education, on values of tolerance and acceptance of the other, mutual respect of rights, equality and social justice. Churches and religions must also inspire the state. It must do this not through triumphalism, but through humility. Religions have to speak out to the consciences of humanity with a message of unity.

Churches advocacy should focus on the role of the Church in the Holy Land, the status of Jerusalem, ecumenism, Christian-Muslim dialogue, Palestinian-Israeli relations and peace and justice issues. The appeal should be to make peace, stop injustice, end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, and enable the achievement of statehood and security for the Palestinians and security for the Israelis. It is clear that total security of one side means total insecurity of the other side. Hence, living and having peace is possible. Even oppressive Israeli military measures do not reduce courage, love, and hope of Palestinian Christians.

Our vision should be inclusive. It applies to all peoples, including Palestinians and Israelis. Dialogue and conversations with Palestinian and Israeli leaders have not reduced the objectivity, search for dialogue and truth, and calls for movement in peacemaking and peace building. We from our side, we should continue to support the Mother Church—the living Christian presence in the Holy Land.
Decade to Overcome Violence
http://www.overcomingviolence.org/

The “Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace 2001 - 2010” is an initiative of the World Council of Churches that calls churches, ecumenical organisations, and all people of goodwill to work together for peace, justice, and reconciliation at all levels; to interact and collaborate with local communities, secular movements, and people of other living faiths towards cultivating a culture of peace; to walk with people who are systematically oppressed by violence and to act in solidarity with all struggling for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, to repent together for our complicity in violence, and to engage in theological reflection to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence. Pax Christi International supports the Programme to Overcome Violence of the WCC.

Holy Land Coordination and Pastoral Visits

A group of European and North American bishops visits annually the Holy Land. This is an established group, which was set up at the request of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem supported by the Holy See. This year, the Holy Land Co-ordination met from the 11th to the 16th of January 2008. The Holy Land Co-ordination, meeting for the eighth time, is the Co-Ordination of Episcopal Conferences in Support of the Church of the Holy Land and the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land (ACOHL).

The aim of the Holy Land Co-ordination is to express solidarity with the local Christians and their communities, both in Palestine as well as in Israel. The bishops come to the Holy Land to pray, to make a pilgrimage and to create political pressure on the governmental authorities. In 2009, the dates are fixed on 10 – 15 January.

Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum

The PIEF was launched at the WCC Conference in Amman, June 2007. Read my report in 07-0641. PIEF is intended as an instrument to catalyse and coordinate new and existing church advocacy for peace. It will be an expression of churches’ commitment to inter-religious action for peace and justice that serves all the peoples in the region. Pax Christi International is member of the Core Group of the Forum with a mandate for three years. The Core Group first met in Geneva from 17 to 18 September 2007. It was then decided to have a second meeting in Palestine: in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, between 16 and 19 January 2008. The next Core Group meeting is in the United Kingdom, 13 – 18 October 2008.

From 10 to 14 September 2008, the WCC (PIEF) and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches are jointly organizing an international and ecumenical conference that will address theological and biblical issues related to the conflict in Palestine/Israel.

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel
The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) supports Palestinians and Israelis working for peace by monitoring and reporting violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, offering protection by accompanying local communities in daily activities, and by advocating with churches for a peaceful end to the Occupation. The programme, which began in 2002, is coordinated by the World Council of Churches (WCC). Pax Christi International is a co-founding NGO of this programme. Different member organisations of Pax Christi International have already been sending some of their members. The EAPPI is doing four things: protection, monitoring, solidarity and advocacy. The EAPPI programme has been active in six places, mainly in West Bank and Gaza, but also in Israel. So far, participants came from 15 different countries, mostly Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. It is strongly suggested that next to Protestants, more Catholics and Orthodox should participate in EAPPI. It is also suggested to make an effort to attract also participants from the South, for instance Africa and Asia. The witness and advocacy work at home is an essential part of the EAPPI. More on EAPPI www.eappi.org

Inter-faith Peace Pilgrimages to the Holy Land

The Holy Land is considered a sacred place by Jews, Christians and Muslims, as well as by other religious groups such as the Druze and Bahá’í. Pax Christi International promotes peace pilgrimages to the Holy Land. In 2008, Pax Christi member organisations in Flanders, Austria, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands were/are planning a Peace Pilgrimage. Depending on the composition of the group, the pilgrimage could be called an “ecumenical peace pilgrimage” or a “contact pilgrimage.” The pilgrims believe in the sanctity of all human life as it is expressed in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths and in the vocation of all humans to overcome violence through the power of truth, love and forgiveness. These pilgrimages are a sign of solidarity, encouragement and hope for all those who, through prayer and action are patiently, and often with great sacrifices, promoting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. The pilgrimages combine both the biblical and historical dimension of the visit (for instance Nazareth, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem), as well as contacts with Church leaders, politicians, analysts and peace and human rights promoters.

Inter-Church-Centre in Jerusalem

The Inter-Church Centre JIC-WCC is located between the New Gate and the Latin Patriarchate, in the old city.¹ The JIC is a recent initiative of the Jerusalem Churches in association with the Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. The JIC is a coordination point for ecumenical action in and for Jerusalem and its churches. JIC provides an ecumenical forum to enhance deliberation and action by churches addressing the many and often critical needs in Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories, with coverage of Israel as appropriate. JIC also provides an essential element in the global ecumenical mobilisation for conflict resolution by articulating the local voice to regional and global actors.

¹ JIC: St. Peter Street, Jaffa gate, Old City, Jerusalem. Mailing address: P.O. Box 741, Jerusalem 91000, tel. ++972-2-6274534 or 6289858, fax ++972-2-6274499.
Pax Christi International is in contact with the Inter-Church Centre, which is available for assistance in setting up different programmes or pilgrimages for our movement and our member organisations. The Centre coordinates also initiatives, liturgies and statements taken by the Head of Churches.

**Bridges not Walls Campaigns**

The “Separation Barrier” constructed by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories is a grave breach of international law and must be removed from the occupied territory. Pax Christi International has been calling all its member organisations to focus its activities on the new symbol of occupation – the “Wall of Shame.” This wall creates a prison. Imprisoning people contributes to injustice, human rights violations and internal conflict. The International Court of Justice declared the wall to be illegal in 2004 and instructed Israel to dismantle it. Nevertheless construction continued. Pax Christi International needs your help to send a strong message to the Israeli government to dismantle the wall. All member organisations are invited to support a petition suggested by Trocaire, one of our CIDSE partners active on Israel & Palestine. [Sign here](http://apps.trocaire.org/justworld/mod/wall/petition.php).

**“It’s Time for Palestine” – Week of Action**

The International Church Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel is an annual Week of Action advocacy initiative, convened by the World Council of Churches and supported by Pax Christi International. In 2008, the Week of Action took place from the 4th to the 10th of June, and the theme was “It’s Time for Palestine.”

The goal of the Week of Action is to raise awareness in churches and civil society, and to impress upon governments the need for new efforts to end the conflict and negotiate a settlement. Four types of actions have been developed: Pray, Educate, Advocate and Public Action. Member organisations of Pax Christi International have been invited to join the Week of Action and develop their own type of actions in collaboration with churches, church related organisations, religious communities or congregations, and with NGOs at the national and/or local level.

Materials have been made available in English, German, French and Spanish:

**Council of Religious Institutions**

The great religions have a role that they are called to always give a message of hope, a word of wisdom and prudence to every man, above all to those who are responsible, in various ways, for the destiny of other men and the fulfillment of the common good. Religions are an instrument of unity among men and men with God. They are called to promote a culture of peace. Christians should become builders of peace. That means that one has to take away the injustices and oppressions that provoke conflict and war. Peace is built starting from personal responsibilites regarding justice, regarding the good of the others, with educatuion in peace.
In January 2008, Patriarch Michel Sabbah informed the Holy Land Coordination of the recently-created Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land in which the major religious leaders of the Jewish, Moslem and Christian communities participate. They meet regularly and reflect upon the shared values and try to prevent religion being used as a source of conflict. These leaders try to serve the goals of just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation. Palestinians yearn for what they see as their inalienable right - for the end of the occupation, if possible by the end of 2008. Israelis long for the day when they can live in personal and national security. The religious leaders set up practical mechanisms in order to monitor the situation, to promote peace education and to work for reconciliation. They also provide consultation to government leaders. They believe that differences should be addressed through dialogue. The Council of Religious Institutions meets every month. They established a “hot line” amongst themselves, and discuss issues such as the status of Jerusalem and the Holy Sites. The Council will also be a reference group for those involved in negotiations about the conflict. The Christian Commission of the Palestinian Authorities was established last year because leaders were ignorant of the position of Palestinian Christians.

**World Day of Prayer**

In January 2008, Patriarch Michel Sabbah suggested the creation of A World Day of Prayer for the Holy Land. Such a Day of Prayer would be a true sign of solidarity with the Christian population of the Holy Land that is facing the threat of extinction due to emigration. Christians are still leaving the region and some of them sell their houses and lands due to financial and economic factors. Emigration should be a free choice and not something that is forced; while the return to their land should be possible as well. The vocation of Christians living in the Holy Land is one of particular importance, for they are builders of justice and peace and represent the living presence of Christ.

**Prayers and Wishes for Advent and Christmas in Bethlehem 2008**

For the ninth consecutive year Christmas celebrations will take place in a difficult climate for all peoples in the Holy Land. Nonetheless, many individuals and groups refuse to give up, and are searching for non-violent ways to voice their rights and work for a peaceful and just future for both peoples. We pray for justice, peace and security for Israel and Palestine. All individual members and member organisations and partners are invited to email Advent and Christmas wishes, and prayers for peace to our partners in Bethlehem. This a “low level action” in which all individuals and local communities can participate. This year, the action will be organised in collaboration with the World Council of Churches and its Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum.

Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, is still first and foremost a city of peace. Sending a wish or a prayer by email is an important way of communicating to many people who long to hear a word of hope. Our partners in Bethlehem greatly appreciate receiving wishes and prayers from people outside the region, both as personal and spiritual gestures of comfort and hope on the occasion of Christmas. These messages are one way of breaking through the isolation our Bethlehem partner’s experience.
Wishes and prayers will be printed and handed out as personal messages, educational materials (e.g. at schools), and in the context of interfaith prayers (in places of worship) and in the new established peace house of the Arab Educational Institute opposite the Wall at Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem. The wishes and prayers could also include ideas for non-violent actions. The action will be launched at the beginning of Advent.

2008-0510-en-me-RV