

Welcome by Greet Vanaerschot, Secretary General of Pax Christi International to participants in the Nonviolence in Africa conference, 5 December 2016, Johannesburg, S. Africa

Greetings of peace from Pax Christi International!

It is an extraordinary time for our movement, and I cannot imagine a more opportune time than now for us to come together, here in South Africa, to explore the role of active nonviolence in creating a future of hope for the people of this continent. Looking around this room and knowing the experience and gifts that each of you bring to our gathering, I am filled with confidence for the success of this conference.

As some of you know, I was appointed Secretary General of Pax Christi International earlier this year, and I want to express my deep personal thanks for your support of me and our movement. In my 30 years at the International Secretariat in Brussels, I have seen this network grow in strength and capacity to mobilize the global Catholic community to promote Jesus's message of peace and nonviolence. Your participation in this conference is an example of this, and we are all strengthened by the work you undertake at this conference.

The Pax Christi presence in Africa has grown to include thirty-eight member organizations in thirteen countries. In each of the regions we are working -the Greater Horn, the Great Lakes region and West Africa and in Africa as a whole, the seriousness and complexity of issues related to violent conflict and the need for peace, justice and reconciliation have become increasingly evident

So why ARE we here?

Today we find ourselves at a new moment and are presented with new opportunities for the growth and flourishing of the Pax Christi International network in Africa. This is why we are here this week, to re-engage with you and each other and to embrace and deliver on the challenge and promise of peace and reconciliation throughout the continent, recognizing diversity and the variety of contexts specific to Africa and to proceed with the utmost care and sensitivity.

We are here because we live in challenging times with widespread expressions of intolerance and extreme violence and where military intervention is more often than not the default option for dealing with conflict. Violence dominates the narrative while expressions of peacebuilding and reconciliation are relegated to the margins. We are challenged to build a stronger grassroots base that can push our religious and political leaders to bring to the mainstream a serious consideration of the potential of strategic nonviolence as an effective tool for promoting peace and reconciliation.

We are here to listen and cultivate a process that both strengthens and decentralizes our global network, including exploring how we can rise to the challenge of connecting and communicating and act together in solidarity more effectively.

I am sure that our time together this week will reveal many more answers to the question of why we are here. And I am excited at the possible directions in which those answers will lead us.

Conclusion

Lastly, in welcoming you today, I want to give some context for our gathering by referencing the commitment that our members from five continents made in Bethlehem last year on the occasion of our 70th anniversary.

From our early days in post-World War II Europe to today's global network existing as 120 member organizations on five continents, the Pax Christi International network responds to the signs of the times in a variety of contexts, contributing a rich diversity of ways to the peace and reconciliation we all seek. The Bethlehem Commitment states:

As we move toward our 75th anniversary in 2020, we will continue to value and learn from the work of each member organization. In an increasingly interconnected world, where challenges to peace are so often global as well as local, we also will seek ways to deepen our connections and build on the peacemaking and peacebuilding experience in our network to address together some of the most pressing threats and to nourish together some of the greatest possibilities for peace.

This is the work we undertake this week in this place. We will deepen our connections, learn from and value the experience of each member organization present here, and address together how we can nourish the possibility of peace in our time.

I am so grateful that all of you could be with us for this important conference. On behalf of the entire staff and your partners around the world in the Pax Christi International network, I welcome you.