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Editorial: Catholic voice for peace more urgent than ever

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Editorial

"Peace is a constituent element of the Gospel. And I think all of us, as an expression of our faith, should be working for peace. It's just a simple expression of our faith." -- Eileen Egan

At first glance, the latest news about the U.S. Catholic peace movement appears a bit grim.

When Pax Christi USA, which was founded by stalwarts Eileen Egan and Gordon Zahn in 1973 amid Catholic pacifists' high hopes stemming from *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes*, celebrated its 40th anniversary at its national conference in June, fewer than 200 people attended [1].

Afterward, the organization announced the end of a partnership [2] that was hailed at its signing three years ago as a crucial way for the group to make inroads in parishes nationwide. A $30,000-a-year deal with 40,000-member faith formation group JustFaith Ministries, Pax Christi leaders said, could no longer fit the budget.

Not exactly signs of vibrancy for an organization that has long merited lead status among lay-led American Catholic groups, nor even perhaps for the global Catholic peace movement itself.

Leaders with the organization know well their challenges: Dioceses across the nation are cutting budgets and closing the social action offices that once inspired membership; newer priests may not be as involved or supportive as the generation formed during and just after the Second Vatican Council; and younger Catholics of this era have nearly uncountable options to become active in politics and social justice issues.

In the face of those difficulties, we say to all Catholic peace leaders unequivocally: Your voice and role is as urgent as ever.

Take events in Kansas City, Mo. For years, the relatively small Midwestern city has been the site of intense debate over the nation's continuing entrenchment in the nuclear weapons complex. Activists there have been organizing against a manufacturing facility that is set to open next year as the first new U.S. nuclear weapons production site in more than three decades.

Building of the complex comes amid promises made by President Barack Obama in Berlin in June that the U.S. will seek substantial nuclear weapons reductions, perhaps in the form of a new drawdown treaty with Russia.

Twenty-three activists were arrested July 13 [3] in Kansas City in a symbolic protest -- the latest in hundreds over the last decade -- at the construction site, where miles of a new National Security Campus now loom where soybeans once grew. Earlier this year, volunteers and leaders with the PeaceWorks KC group were able to convince 23 percent of Kansas City voters to support a local ballot measure banning future funding for the site.

Not numbers high enough to shut down Kansas City weapons production, or even claim popular support, but

certainly significant ones. PeaceWorks isn't strictly speaking a faith-based organization, but many members and leaders are religious, Catholic even, which demonstrates how influential an organized, supportive Catholic peace network could be.

Retired Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, a longtime Pax Christi USA member and former bishop president of the group, said it needs to "stay small and get more radical." Contrast his message with that of local Kansas City activist and Catholic Jane Stoever. The Kansas City nuclear weapons plant, she said, "is in our backyard. We need to respond."

The nation is confronting an unprecedented number of issues that pull on the Catholic conscience -- from the continuation of the nuclear weapons complex, to wide allegations of government intrusion in daily life, to whether the U.S. will militarily intervene in a number of global conflicts like the Syrian civil war.

It's time for U.S. Catholics devoted to peace to respond -- to make known the truths they find in the Gospel's message of nonviolence and love of neighbor.

Egan is a perpetual role model. An author and longtime coordinator for Catholic Relief Services, she pulled herself off the CRS payroll temporarily in 1965 to venture to Rome to attend the last session of Vatican II.

While there, she, along with Zahn and others, successfully lobbied the bishops to affirm in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, a right for Catholics to choose pacifism and conscientious objection.

In wider society, Catholics must likewise refuse to stand by as those in power make decisions impacting the dignity of humans worldwide.

The issues standing in our collective backyards are too important. The vision for a Catholic peace movement cannot cease. Perhaps those tending it at the national level could look to Kansas City for guidance.

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