

News



People exchange the sign of peace during a Mass celebrated Sept. 7 as part of Pax Christi USA's annual national conference, held virtually and attended by more than 200 Catholic peace and social justice advocates from across the country and the world. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/PaxChristUSA)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

[View Author Profile](#)

cbarone@ncronline.org

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 11, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Pax Christi USA held its annual national conference virtually Sept. 6-7, attracting more than 200 Catholic peace and social justice advocates from across the country and the world who delved into the theme "We Are One Body: Being a Prophetic Church in a Time of Polarization and Conflict."

Speakers and attendees reflected on the rising polarization within the broader world and the Catholic Church, while exploring solutions grounded in dialogue and nonviolence. They discussed complex issues such as the war in the Middle East, gun violence, immigration, religious nationalism and interfaith relations.

The event kicked off on Friday, Sept. 6, with an opening prayer, followed by a plenary presentation featuring Charlene Howard, executive director of Pax Christi USA, and Jack Jezreel, founder of JustFaith Ministries. Their moderated conversation examined what it means to be Catholic and prophetic in today's polarized political landscape and urged Catholics to be a leading voice in fostering unity and healing divisions.

"Our core and focus is Jesus Christ, and therefore peace and justice are part of the natural manifestation of being a disciple of Christ," Howard told the National Catholic Reporter. "If we are doing that, and if we're being intentional about all of what that means, we will be able to fight the good fight, and be the presence that we need to be, that is so countercultural."



Pax Christi USA executive director Charlene Howard, left, and JustFaith's executive director Jack Jezreel speak Sept. 6 during the opening plenary of Pax Christi USA's 2024 virtual national conference. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/PaxChristUSA)

Saturday's programming included panels and breakout sessions and a plenary session. Experts in immigration, religious dialogue, and church reform discussed the Catholic Church's role in bringing social justice and reconciliation to some of America's most polarizing political affairs.

Ruben Garcia, executive director of Annunciation House, a volunteer group in El Paso, Texas, that provides hospitality to immigrants and refugees, spoke about the church's response to the immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. He highlighted the importance of human dignity and compassion.

Cynthia Bailey Manns, a parish director of faith formation in Minneapolis and a participant in the Vatican's [synod on synodality](#), discussed how the synod's deliberations could influence the church's future, particularly regarding inclusivity.

[Jordan Denari Duffner](#), a member of the Catholic Advisory Council of Churches for Middle East Peace and an expert on Muslim-Catholic relations, spoke about the urgent need for the church to advocate for peace in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

In reflecting on the relationship between Catholics and Muslims in the U.S. amid the ongoing violence in Gaza and the West Bank, Duffner told NCR that there are frustrations among Muslim partners over what they see as Catholic apathy toward the issue. Despite notable Catholic-led campaigns for justice, many efforts remain underpublicized, leaving many Muslim communities feeling disconnected from the church's advocacy.



A panel presentation on the second day of the Pax Christi USA conference included (clockwise from top left): Cynthia Bailey Manns, moderator Lauren Bailey, moderator Marie Dennis, Ruben Garcia and Jordan Denari Duffner. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/PaxChristUSA)

A critical problem, she said, is that many Catholics misunderstand the conflict as a balanced struggle between two equally powerful sides, failing to grasp the systemic dominance many Palestinians endure.

"Even if there were no Christians in the Holy Land, even if there were no Palestinian Christians at all, I think Catholics still have a responsibility to get involved on this issue, because, as our faith teaches us, whenever any population or any group of people is suffering, even if we don't see ourselves as responsible, we do have a responsibility to alleviate the suffering that exists," she said.

"In the case of U.S. Catholics, we actually do have some responsibility for what's going on, in the sense that our government is actively supporting Israel's violence against the Palestinians through military aid and we have a Catholic president. We really need to be using our leverage as Catholics to push our fellow Catholics to make a change in policy."

In her broader work on Catholic-Muslim dialogue, Duffner pointed to Francis as a powerful example of bridge-building between faiths. She praised his consistent moral leadership on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories, calling him a model for Catholics in fostering empathy, understanding and collaboration with Muslim communities.

Advertisement

"We can be enriched by going on that journey together," she said, adding that her next book will be about Francis' papacy's contribution to Muslim-Catholic dialogue.

Scott Wright, Pax Christi USA ambassador of peace and a member of the Israel-Palestine Working Group at Pax Christi International, spoke on one of the most-attended panels of the conference, called "What Catholics Need to Know About Palestine." He recounted a 10-day trip he took in August to the "most vulnerable

places" in the West Bank, Palestine and Israel with a Pax Christi delegation.

Describing the trip as an "accompaniment" mission, Wright said the group visited places deeply affected by the conflict, including refugee camps in the West Bank and Bedouin communities suffering from escalating settler violence.

In an interview with NCR before the conference, Wright emphasized the increasing aggression of Israeli settlers toward Palestinian communities, noting that many of these groups are left unprotected by Israeli soldiers.

Wright told NCR that one of the most moving moments was an interfaith service held near the Gaza-Egypt-Israel border, where participants could hear the ongoing bombings in Gaza. The service brought together religious leaders from various traditions, including rabbis and sheikhs, all united in their call for peace.

Interfaith Service for a Ceasefire



Interfaith Service at Gaza Border:

Left: Rabbi Abi Dabush – Rabbis for Human Rights / Right: Omar Hamary – Sabeel & Muslim Sheikh
One Mile from the Kibbutzim attacked on Oct 7
One Mile from Khan Younis and Egypt border

Scott Wright speaks during the panel "What Catholics Need to Know About Palestine." He recounted a 10-day trip he took in August to the "most vulnerable places" in the West Bank, Palestine and Israel with a Pax Christi delegation. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/PaxChristUSA)

This symbolic act of solidarity, Wright reflected, underscored the possibility of cooperation and reconciliation among Israelis, Palestinians and international allies despite the deep wounds of the conflict.

"There was this kind of convergence, Israeli hostage families, Palestinians, the Christian community and our group, for a cease-fire and for an end to the violence. We were all on the same page in that respect," he said. "We as Catholics are hardwired to be hopeful, that's the heart of our faith."

Howard, Pax Christi USA's executive director, told NCR, "What is going on in Palestine is important to us, and we have people actively working and being present to that issue. Being a prophetic voice, which is what we are constantly working to be, is to recognize, first of all, the value of human beings, and that it doesn't matter where you're coming from in the region. Human beings should not be tortured. Human beings should not be put in positions where their homes are bombed and they now cannot even know where to live, leading to the humanitarian crisis that is happening right now."

Wright drew connections between his time in the region and his previous experiences in war-torn El Salvador. He likened the suffering of Palestinians to the horrors witnessed by the "*abuelas*" of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the mothers of the disappeared in El Salvador. His reflections pointed to a shared resilience among these communities, one that, despite facing immense violence and oppression, continues to hold on to hope for peace and justice.

'When we wonder why we have not been more effective at evangelizing, or in implementing our social teaching, or in proclaiming God's mercy — it comes down to a certain deafness.'

—Bishop John Stowe

[Tweet this](#)

One workshop, "Getting to the Root: Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery 2.0," shed light on how centuries-old [colonial doctrines](#) have shaped contemporary injustices against Indigenous peoples. Activists from Indigenous communities shared their work to undo this legacy and called on Catholics to take active steps toward

reconciliation.

Another session, "Disarming Harm: Peaceful Paths to Reducing Gun Violence," brought together members of faith-based groups working to address the plague of gun violence in the United States. Panelists from organizations like Nuns Against Gun Violence shared their approaches to advocacy, education and legislative change, underlining the "moral imperative" for Catholics to confront this issue.

The event concluded with a virtual closing Mass led by Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky. Stowe is the bishop president of Pax Christi USA and a longtime advocate for social justice.

"The church is often accused of having lots of answers to questions no one is asking. And when we wonder why we have not been more effective at evangelizing, or in implementing our social teaching, or in proclaiming God's mercy — it comes down to a certain deafness," he said in his homily.

"Think about our treatment of transgender persons or any of the LGBTQ community. We have pronouncements about intrinsic disorder before we have encountered the person, the story, the experiences that the person has and their longing for love and fulfillment. As members of Pax Christi, we know very well how the Gospel of nonviolence goes unheard as we opine about what Ukraine or the Palestinians need in time of attack and war."