

# Connecting immigration, economics, racism

By Pearlette Springer



I decided to take the bus to Erie for the council meeting at the beginning of April. As I sat in various bus stations, I noticed the people around me. The majority of them probably would not have chosen this mode of transportation if they had the capability to ride in a car or a plane. It was the most diverse

group of people I have been with in a long time. Racially mixed. No racial group dominated the bus. Culturally mixed. The people were from all walks of life—Amish, students, grandparents, Spanish-speaking, Caribbean, Middle Eastern. Economically mixed from one end of the spectrum to the other. One person was carrying a green garbage bag and had a child with her. Age mixed, from the elderly to college students and even a few infants.

As I reflect back over my trip, I do not have a clue how to walk in some of their shoes. I had not a clue of their pain of marginalization, poverty and discrimination. Peace. Do they have peace in their life or is it a pathway of chaos? As I reflect, these are the people who need us. These are the poor, the widow, the children. They are the ones who are poor in spirit, imprisoned, hungry, the thirsty. They are the ones suffering the pain of injustice about which we will be questioned when we knock on the pearly gates.

These are the people who are really impacted by economics, immigration and racism. These are the people affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the war at home—immigration, racism, violence, drugs. These are the people affected by nuclear arms as well as illegal guns and gun violence in the streets. These are the people affected by global climate change as well as the legal and illegal dumping of toxic waste in their communities. They are affected by the

School of the Americas as well as schools that don't provide adequate education to our inner city youth. We promote a spirituality of nonviolence and peace. They need a spirituality of nonviolence and peace.

**Economics, immigration and racism.** Economics, immigration and racism are all intermingled in the lives of some of the people I was on the bus with. Upon arriving at the Erie station, two border patrol officers stood at the door of the bus. As each passenger exited, we were asked if we were U.S. citizens. Two Hispanic men were pulled to the side and had to prove their citizenship.

Look at the woman traveling with her child with their personal items and clothes in a large garbage bag. If she had a little money, she would at least have bought herself a suitcase. She is migrating from one place to another; will she be rejected first by the color of her skin or because she is poor?

**Immigration.** The immigration issue is so much more than Mexicans crossing the border. There are "illegal" Europeans in this country. The question that needs to be asked loudly and clearly: why aren't "illegal" Europeans being singled out like the Mexicans? Why don't Europeans with heavy accents and limited English skills have to prove their citizenship?

**Racism.** Hispanics are being singled out because of the color of their skin, hair and eyes. Hispanics are singled out because of their language, accent and physical features. The poorest people on this side of the world are stopped mid-stream and sent back to Haiti. Cubans can come in and ask for asylum because of U.S. leadership's ongoing distaste for Cuban leadership. Cubans in Cuba are eating everyday; Haitians in Haiti are not. Haitians have been isolated from the 'European World' since the slaves fought and won their independence in 1804. The U.S.—we—continue this tradition of isolation by sending Haitians back from whence they came.

**Economics. Immigration. Racism.** As church,

as Catholics, as Christians—Are we touching lives? Are we building relationships? Have we opened our arms to those in our communities who need us? Can we—have we—connected the dots? War is war whether it is in the Middle East or ten miles down the road in the inner city or the mass shooting at the university. Are nuclear arms that much different than the drug war, gun war, gang war? Is it not killing us all? It is no longer an inner city—African American—problem. It is now going on in our predominantly white suburbs.

Can our actions and vigils on global restoration address the issue of toxic waste dumps in the inner city? The School of the Americas is training and creating terrorists; the lack of quality of education in the inner city schools is leaving youth no other choice but to terrorize the neighborhoods.

Can we make a difference in the lives of the people down the street and be true to our mission as PCUSA? Or is the real question, do we WANT to make a difference in the lives of the people down the street and across the tracks?

Transparency and honesty. Yes, we are the peace movement. Yes, we live in a global community. The war in the Middle East does have a direct effect on the communities in which we live, work and pray. Our communities are no longer racially homogeneous. Our problem is their problem and their problem is ours. We are about peace. These are our peace issues.

As we grow, we change. If we don't change, we become stagnant and die. We are not the same organization that was started thirty-seven years ago. The peace and justice issues are the same but our approach is different—it must be different. Let us stand together for something or the last one out can turn off the lights and close the door.

*Pearlette Springer is the chair of the Pax Christi USA National Council.*

## UN celebrates 60 years of promoting human rights

By Madeline Labriola

*"Many years ago this declaration was approved, However, not all countries respect this document. And this is why everyone ought to read this document, And why it should be taught in schools all over the world."*  
Ruth Rocha, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, An Adaptation for Children

On the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations NGO community held its 61st Annual Conference in Paris. Pax Christi was represented by Claudette Werleigh, Secretary General of Pax Christi International (PCI); Colette Petit, NGO representative to UNESCO; Sr. Elizabeth Anne DiPippo, SU, Hudson Valley (NY) Pax Christi; and myself.

France was chosen as the site of the conference because it served as the host country for the signing of the Declaration in 1948. The Declaration was the first universal statement setting out the basic principles of human rights and the fundamental freedoms to which all peoples in every nation of the world are entitled.

The Conference served as an opportunity for a cross section of the global NGO community—civil society organizations, grassroots constituencies, UN agencies, Member States and other representatives—to share knowledge and experience about how best to contribute to the advancement of human rights around the world.

This Conference had a more interactive dimension than previous meetings. There were five round table panel discussions that stimulated dialogue on making the Declaration a way of life for all. Following the panel were "break-out" sessions led by experts. These sessions gave us an opportunity for more in-depth discussion on experiences and best practices.

Opening the Conference was Madam Simone Veil who shared her story of being deported to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen at age 17, where she lost her mother. Her life's work has been dedicated to bringing an end to discrimination and religious intolerance.

Among the dignitaries were ordinary people work-

ing in the field discussing their human rights work, how best to respond to and prevent incidences of gross human rights abuses. We heard stories from two young men who had escaped from the Sudan and were helped by the Salesian Fathers. They could not give their real names for fear of retaliation.

"Education is most important. Many people do not even know that they have rights, it is up to us to tell them," they said.

Daniel Bekele and Netsanet Demissie Belay spent two years as political prisoners in jail in Ethiopia because of their activism in promoting human rights and good governance. With the help of groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, they were released and are continuing their work. They encouraged NGOs to speak out when abuses occur since many times governments will not, because of political reasons, do so.

"Even though democratic governments allow civil society to speak out, the international diplomatic community often is quiet on abuses," they said.

Mary Evelyn Tucker of Yale presented one of the most interesting workshops, "Human Rights, Sustainable Development and the Earth Charter." Tucker reminded us that we belong to a "vast evolving universe" that is not only about human beings but the rights of all nature. As we study human rights we must also recognize that to achieve planetary security, we all must strive to guarantee every citizen the right to a healthy environment and environmental justice.

"In spite of the severe challenges posed by climate change, both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter, whose idea started in 1991 at the Rio Earth Summit, serve to be a 'horizon of hope' for all people," she remarked.

Throughout the Conference, we were reminded that the Declaration was written to make governments behave. Citizens often depend upon the governments to do the right thing but governments are powerless unless supported by the people. Many speakers spoke of the importance of education in the

awareness of human rights. For the Declaration to be realized, we must be human rights educators not only in our formal education by including these rights in all curricula, but also in informal education in the way we treat each other and live our own lives.

Claudette Werleigh, Secretary General of Pax Christi International, made presentations at a round table and at a midday workshop on the work of Pax Christi members in the field of human rights education. She pointed out that an important strength of the NGO community is that there is much diversity with members working on many issues including the development of a culture of peace.

"Without a guarantee of human rights, peace is not possible," she said.

She encouraged us to go beyond our comfort zone to reach out in areas that we are not familiar with and to touch people who might be quite different, culturally, economically or spiritually.

Women's issues continue to be a major topic, including the conflict between culture and their basic human rights. Many women are unaware of their rights and therefore cannot claim them or teach them to their children. Through the efforts of grassroots NGOs to educate and empower women, many dehumanizing practices have been eradicated. Local women's groups have formed and are in the active process of training and teaching each other.

In the last 10 years many conferences have been held around the world in which citizens' voices were heard. Although much progress has been made, we face new and different challenges in today's world. We must not lose heart, but continue to let our voices be heard each in our own way or working through organizations like Pax Christi International to make a better world for all people regardless of age, race, religion, social status, disability or gender.

*Madeline Labriola is a member of Pax Christi USA and Pax Christi International's Representative to the United Nations.*