Pax Christi Michigan Statement on WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

In her book *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, theologian and Episcopal priest Carter Heyward identified white Christian nationalism (WCN) as “a movement spawned by white Christian American men to superimpose their conservative religious values on the leaders and laws of the United States.” Amplifying Heyward’s alarm, a group of Catholic universities and social justice organizations, including Pax Christi USA, reviewed voter suppression efforts prior to the 2022 midterm elections, and issued a statement that: “White Christian Nationalism, an ideology heretical to authentic faith, represents a clear and present danger to building a multi-faith, multiracial democracy.”

Although the three components of WCN are inextricably linked, it is helpful to briefly examine each element independently. Note that deep, disturbing assumptions of *superiority* and *dominance* characterize WCN. *White* refers to “white supremacy,” and in particular to the shameful history of virulent racism in the United States, from the “original sin” of slavery, to Jim Crow, and over the years, to the epidemic of deaths of unarmed people of color at the hands of police and vigilantes. The *Christian* component represents the conviction that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation and is *divinely favored*, as “evidenced” by its enormous wealth and power. Accordingly, the American “mission” is to spread its religion, freedom and civilization – and to use force if and when necessary. *Nationalism* reflects the belief in “American exceptionalism,” the notion that the U.S. is both unrivaled and destined to have

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a unique role in transforming the world. This has resulted in a global backlash against the spirit of American nationalism that characterizes U.S. foreign policy. WCN adherents cling furiously to their delusions, in large part to counteract acute insecurities and fears that America’s mission and power are threatened by the growing presence of non-Americans, non-whites, and non-Christians in our midst, and not coincidentally, among voters.

White Christian nationalists embrace an extreme, fundamentalist version of the faith that fuses God and country with a militarized, racialized and nativist gospel at odds with genuine faith. They regard “others” - African-Americans, Muslims, Latin Americans, Asian-Americans, Jews, LGBTQ persons, immigrants – “as both inferior, and as enemies to be defeated, deported or destroyed,” says Mennonite professor Drew Strait. The National Council of Churches points out that morally, WCN “gives little attention to structural issues of poverty, racism, the healing of our planet, and international peace, thereby undermining justice and causing great harm.” Furthermore, “genuine morality must be rooted in a clear-minded devotion to truth, including an accurate understanding of our history, our failings as well as our successes.”

Tragically, as New Yorker editor Michael Luo points out, “Christian churches have often provided institutional spaces for the preservation and transmission of white supremacist attitudes.” This has played into the hands of white Christian nationalists. Fr. Tom Reese writes that by making a single issue “their ‘preeminent priority,’ the [U.S. Catholic] bishops made Donald Trump and the Republican Party their allies.” Yet, “Republican legislators ... have opposed almost every proposal that would have implemented Catholic Social Teaching.” Accordingly, the “collateral damage” has included: “The Voting Rights Act; the Earth and humanity; migrants and refugees; the poor; and, democracy.” And disturbingly, prophetic moral leadership.
WCN is playing a harmful role in the deep divide within American society today, as reflected dramatically in the January 6 insurrection, including the flagrant misuse of religious symbols. As Pax Christi USA 2021 Teacher of Peace Fr. Bryan Massingale noted, “The brutal mob violence of January 6 was a clear declaration that many white Americans would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy. If democracy means sharing power with people of color, and especially Black people, they want no part of it.” Yale sociologist Philip Gorski claims that “Trumpism is the current version of the WCN frame.” Donald Trump has given a contemporary form to racist attitudes that have long festered in American Christianity, and WCN remains at the center of the deadly serious, ongoing threat to American democracy. The violence of WCN protestors in Charlottesville, and of those who attacked the U.S. Capitol at the instigation of Trump, has not miraculously disappeared. And distressingly, the new U.S. Congress includes over 170 members who have denied or cast doubts on the 2020 election.

It may appear we are powerless in the face of devastating racism, a “Christianity” that has been hijacked and bears no resemblance to the authentic Gospel of Jesus, and to an aggressive, violent American nationalism. White Christian nationalism, the toxic combination of these elements, is clearly dangerous and formidable. However, we are not without the means to address WCN, and thus to contribute to what the late South African priest Fr. Albert Nolan called “God’s great and mysterious work.” We have the assurance of Christ himself, in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are you who are peacemakers.” We have Catholic Social Teaching that, as Pax Christi Ambassador of Peace Joe Nangle points out, “has for the past 125 years intelligently and faithfully found Gospel-based interpretations and actions for an entire range of human problems.” And we have our own experience and that of all who have creatively and nonviolently resisted oppression for generations, including: educating ourselves and others; public statements; identifying injustices and supporting those affected; working for free and fair elections; demonstrating and marching for justice; seeking and proclaiming truth in the face of lies and deception; nonviolently confronting those responsible for oppression to search for understanding and reconciliation; and, perhaps most essential, prayer.

In our work for justice, it is crucial to be ever mindful of the extraordinary challenge.

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of Jesus’ directive to “love our enemies.” It is tempting to fall into the trap of judging those who perpetrate evil as beyond redemption, while simultaneously viewing ourselves as above reproach. As Alex Mikulich, the keynote speaker at our Pax Christi Michigan 2023 State Conference writes, we must “not look away from our own violence.” What are our own “assumptions of superiority and dominance,” and how may we have contributed, overtly or more subtly, to oppression and injustice? Etty Hillesum, who died at Auschwitz after facing the most barbaric evil of the 20th Century, wrote in her diary, “I really see no other solution than to turn inwards and root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves.” In the Pax Christi “Vow of Nonviolence,” we promise to practice the nonviolence of Jesus by: “striving for peace within (ourselves); refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence; actively resisting evil; and, working nonviolently.” Finally, we agree unreservedly with Thomas Merton, who wrote to a friend in December 1961 this profound, compassionate conviction: “We have to open our hearts to a universal and all-embracing love that knows no limits and no obstacles, a love that is not scandalized by the sinner, a love that takes upon itself the sins of the world. There must be total love of all, even of the most distant, even of the most hostile.”

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Pax Christi Michigan held their 28th annual "Reflection and Renewal... for the Long Haul" retreat at the Maryville Retreat Center in Holly, MI the weekend of October 14-16, 2022. Time was shared in prayer, reflection, singing, fun, laughter, and taking walks by the lake - Presenters were married couple PCUSA national staff member Michelle Sherman and Dr. Nick Rademacher, professor at the University of Dayton in the Religious Studies department. 

When the 25 participants arrived on Friday afternoon, they were greeted warmly by Pax Christi Michigan leaders Mary Hanna, Fred Thelen, Pat Valaer, and Marianne Bernard. After settling into rooms that were lovingly prepared with fresh flowers, quotes, folders, and resources from the Metta Center for Nonviolence, they gathered for an icebreaker, refreshments, and overall good fun! Sounds of laughter and greetings filled the space as friends reunited.

Continuing the celebration of Pax Christi USA’s 50th Anniversary Year and Pax Christi Michigan’s 40th, the PCUSA “Weaving Threads of Peace” tapestry was used to help set the space and remind retreatants of the larger PCUSA community. Ambassador of Peace Kathy O’Leary (NJ) hand-wove the tapestry, including within the fabric the holding prayer intentions from members around the USA.

On Saturday morning, the Opening Prayer Service set the tone for the day, with songs, Scripture reading, reflection, Modern Psalm for Social Justice, and time for quiet. Throughout the weekend, Nick and Michelle highlighted four “long haul” peacemakers and themes in their lives: Paul Hanly Furfey with the theme of Denouncing Evil, Catherine de Hueck Doherty’s Ongoing Discernment, Ellen Tarry’s modeling of Establish Boundaries, and James Sulton’s Taking a Stand.

Nick, a historian of American Catholic history and teacher of Catholic Social Teaching, has researched the lives of these four witnesses and written a book on Pax Christi USA’s 1980 Teacher of Peace, Paul Hanly Furfey. After Nick shared about the lives of Furfey, De Hueck, Tarry, and Sulton, Michelle invited the participants to sit with reflection questions based on the themes in their own lives and call to be peacemakers. After each period of quiet time, the participants were paired up to share their thoughts with one another, providing another way of deepening the reflections and growing in community. There was also time to view two films: The Third Harmony and John Lewis: Good Trouble.
And what would a retreat be without great food, time to relax, and some good fun?! Breaks were scheduled throughout the weekend to take a walk by the lake, hike on the trails, snack, and enjoy the company of everyone gathered. On Saturday night, there was a sing-along complete with musical instruments and judging of the autumn bag decoration contest!

On Sunday, there was one last session with Nick and Michelle, followed by a beautiful communal liturgy before everyone headed home, refreshed and renewed!

**Some comments from participants included:**
- "What a special, meaningful, stimulating weekend! I enjoyed it."
- "Thank you so much for the presence, words, smiles, and inspiration. What a beautiful and peaceful and joyful weekend."
- "What a blessing to Pax Christi and all of us! The weekend together was both educational and enjoyable— not to mention inspirational and just what we need for ‘the long haul.’"
- "Wonderful presenters- I felt moved and inspired by all the ways my spirit was nourished and inspired to continue the work of peacemaking, of Pax Christi!"
- "We are all so grateful for the gifts brought this weekend– the thoughts to ponder, the examples to consider, the questions to wrestle with, and the insights to enlighten us. Thank you!"

**A note from Michelle and Nick:** What a gift it was to be with Pax Christi Michigan for the annual “Reflection and Renewal... for the Long Haul” retreat! Even though we were the facilitators holding space for the participants, the experience was just as much of a retreat for us— we left nourished and inspired by the many faces, stories, and actions that make up Pax Christi Michigan! Congrats to PCM on your very special anniversary year! Thank you for the invitation to share, reflect, rest, and renew with you.

**A million thanks to Michelle and Nick for sharing the weekend with us and inspiring everyone to “keep on keeping on!”** Blessings of peace and love to you always!
Our Up-coming 2023 STATE CONFERENCE

This year's important conference features keynote speaker Alex Mikulich. Alex is a Catholic theologian, social ethicist, and activist. He has devoted his scholarship and activism over 20 years to addressing anti-Black supremacy in the Church and society. His latest book, *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation*, was published by Orbis Books in 2022. His previous co-authored books include *The Scandal of White Complicity in US Hyper-Incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (Palgrave, 2013) and *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Orbis Books, 2007), which won the 2008 Theological Book of the Year from the College Theology Society. Alex won a 2023 ACTA Foundation Grant to fund a parish adult antiracism program that will be piloted at parishes in Silver Spring, MD and Tampa, Florida.

During the conference, we also plan to take ACTION with our First Nation brothers and sisters, who have been fighting tirelessly to protect everyone's access to safe, potable water.

And last, but certainly not least, we will be celebrating the prophetic peacemakers in our midst: Read on to learn more about Mike and Carmen Kelly, our 2023 Purple Ribbon for Peace Award winners, and Michelle Sherman, our 2023 Young Peace Activist Award recipient. They give us much to be thankful for and to aspire to.

April 15, 2023
Sts. Simon & Jude Parish
Westland, MI

DETAILS & REGISTRATION AT:
PaxChristiMI.org
Carmen (Restrepo) was born in Colombia and came to the US to pursue graduate studies in biochemistry at Wayne State University’s (WSU’s) School of Medicine. She worked for the Detroit Health Department and later married. Mike was then working for SEIU Local 79 representing nursing home and building maintenance workers. He later spent many years in the field of chemical dependency treatment, retiring as director of treatment at Sacred Heart Rehabilitation Center.

Carmen had a first cousin and childhood friend who was a diocesan priest in Colombia, and very active in speaking and acting for justice for rural coffee workers. He died a martyr: Fr. Jaime Restrepo was assassinated by a death squad while leaving church following Sunday Mass. This occurred in full view of almost the entire population of the village – as a message. The villagers defiantly refused to allow his body to be removed for burial elsewhere because they wanted to honor him as their own patron saint. We believe that Fr. Jaime Restrepo has been guiding us through many years of our marriage since then.

Over 40 years ago, we began attending Pax Christi East meetings at Dominican High School. East Side Pax Christi Michigan folks will recall our little daughter, Julie, who used to mooch cookies and other goodies from everyone’s plate at our regular dinners. She is expecting her first child this summer: the next generation of peace builders. Through East Side PCM, we met our friends Sue Schreiber, Carol Hoefer, and Ron and Carol Jachim. Fr. Jerry Singer often joined our monthly meetings as did Sigrid Dale, Bill & Mary Carey, Virginia and Anne Kossel, and other inspiring souls. All remain dear friends and/or treasured memories. Joan Tirak, former State Coordinator for Pax Christi Michigan, was another central figure in our peace builder lives then. Another memorable attendee was a representative from a (then very active) racist hate group called Breakthrough. They were implicated in blowing up school busses in Pontiac to stop school integration efforts. The man who attended our meetings was presumably sent on a subversive mission of some sort. For good or ill, however, he was a very shy agitator and said nothing until, sitting sadly by himself at the end of the peace and justice discussion, someone would ask him if he had anything to contribute. That’s a pretty perfect example of peace building in action! He never said much but usually read a statement calling for our repentance. The East Side group also helped host the inspiring Sr. Jose Hobday at Dominican High School for a Pax Christi Michigan annual conference.

We later became active in resisting the racist obstructions to sheltering refugees from the US fueled “contra wars” in Central America. Sadly, after decades have passed, we have resumed work in this area through involvement in Strangers No Longer. In that work we are also joined by old (OOOPS! that is say: “long-standing”) friends such as Kim Redigan, and Ed & Marilyn Lorenz. We also came to know many other Pax Christi allies through Meta Peace Team actions, and Kim Bergier led us to a peace demonstration at the Oak Ridge nuclear bomb plant.
Pax Christi Michigan retreats over the years have been a great way to recharge our souls and renew friendship and make new ones. Serving for several years on the Pax Christi State Council has been another way to be re-inspired through sharing the light with like spirited friends. We had a wonderful opportunity for appreciating the broad national scope of Pax Christi when we attended a Pax Christi USA national conference on anti-racism. There we met with a diverse group of active peace builders from all parts of the USA. It helped bring to clearer focus our appreciation of the fact that building peace and working for justice are often inseparable aspects of the same reality – the incarnation, the unity of all in all.

Following 9-11 we became very active in trying to resist the spread of anti-Muslim xenophobia. We feared that the same dark minds and spirits that could intern loyal Japanese Americans could easily turn on a different group to demonize. This organizing experience came into use again with the rise of feverish hostility toward Hispanic refugees and immigrants when it was seen by some what a useful political stance that form of bigotry would be. Happily, being a bilingual couple, we were able to work together with several organizations in giving “Know Your Rights” presentations and other services to the Spanish speaking communities in our area. So many good new friends have come through this as well. One wonderful spin-off has been the Friday evening Clark Park vigils in Southwest Detroit, a largely Hispanic community. This was started by Pax Christi Michigan activist Kim Redigan over six years ago, and is still going strong. All are welcome to join us at Vernor and Clark St. every Friday starting about 4pm and lasting until we get too cold.

Through the years we have learned that if you are going to join a cloud of witnesses, it’s wise to pick ones who are fun to be with! For example, from engagement with the spirit and work of Pax Christi we have an ongoing commitment to the following peace and justice related communities and organizations: Day House (The Detroit Catholic Worker community) where Ron Dale also volunteered, the Detroit Friends Meeting (Quakers), Strangers No Longer, Detroit’s Amnesty International chapter, the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality, Women In Black, and Casa Samaritano (a migrant shelter in Hidalgo, Mexico).

Looking back on the journey we’ve made with Pax Christi Michigan, we can agree with Flannery O’Connor’s paraphrase of John 8:32 - “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd.” It continues to be an adventure in good company all the way. 

Michelle Sherman

Michelle Sherman is the Program Director for Nonviolence and Campus Outreach for the Pax Christi USA national office. Many of us know Michelle from all the outstanding work she did in coordinating the 50th Anniversary of Pax Christi USA. Michelle was born in the Philippines and grew up in St. Louis, MO. She graduated from Saint Mary’s College (2008), and earned a MA in Theology and Ministry from Villanova University (2012). Following graduation from Saint Mary’s, she lived and worked with the Cabrini Sisters in New York City for two years at Mother Cabrini High School.

Michelle first came to Pax Christi USA after meeting Nancy Small, former National Coordinator of Pax Christi USA in 2012. Nancy recommended Michelle for the national council of Pax Christi USA, where she served for 3 years. During that time,
she, Bob Shine, and Brian Ashmankas served on the national council and re-started the Pax Christi Young Adult Caucus (formerly the Young Adult Forum). She co-authored two of Pax Christi USA’s Advent reflection booklets (2018, 2021) and wrote Pax Christi USA’s A Prayer for Peace and Solidarity in a Time of Pandemic. During this time, she was the campus minister for retreats at Villanova University outside Philadelphia, PA, where she began to integrate the spirituality of nonviolence into retreats, reflections, faith sharing groups for students and faculty/staff. Before long, Campus Ministry and the Center for Peace and Justice Education began reaching out to student life; residence life; health services; the office of diversity, equity, and inclusion; academic departments; and more to join and assess the role of nonviolence at the university. By the time she left her position five years later, there was a working group of 25 faculty and staff from across the campus who had been trained by Pace e Bene and met regularly to bring active nonviolence in their own departments and classes. In 2021, Michelle joined Pax Christi USA’s national staff as 50th Anniversary Coordinator, working with two working groups of local leaders to both honor the legacy of peace-making and seed the future of our movement throughout the year. This culminated in the 50th Anniversary Conference in Washington, D.C. in August of 2022. Michelle completed the spiritual direction formation program with the Sisters of Mercy (2019) and is also a retreat presenter. Michelle is married to Nick Rademacher and they live in Dayton, OH. She and Nick served as facilitators for Pax Christi Michigan’s “Reflection and Renewal... for the Long Haul” Annual Retreat in 2022. Included in Michelle’s many interests are the integration of art, spirituality, and justice; gardening; and knitting! For those of you who don’t know her yet, she is truly amazing. Please make a point of meeting her at our up-coming State Conference!