

HEART OF THE MATTER 'Pilgrims on the Path to Peace' was the theme of Pax Christi International's 70th anniversary conference gathered in the Holy Land. **Judith Sudilovsky** report on some of the observations made by the global peace network.

'No peace without ecological justice'

It took only a slight turn of an eye to see the glaring difference in levels of water availability and consumption between the Israeli agricultural settlement of Petza'el and the three neighbouring dusty Palestinian villages just outside Jericho.

Up on the hill next to the settlement stood a gleaming white water tower for the use of the Israeli settlement, while in the village cluster, an old well built by Jordan prior to the 1967 war sat, neglected and locked, and an old agricultural aqueduct was dry.

Some participants in Pax Christi International's Pilgrims on the Path to Peace 70th anniversary conference, taking place in Bethlehem, gathered in the village on 13th May on one of the conference's six simultaneous pilgrimages to see different realities of Palestinian life. Some 150 delegates from 30 countries participated in the five-day conference.

The three Palestinian villages are located in Area C, which covers 60 per cent of the West Bank. Israel retains control of its security and civil land-management, practically prohibiting any Palestinian construction and development. Many of the water sources in the area are largely put to service for the approximate 10,000 Israeli settlers living in the area. The 60,000 Palestinians of the Jordan Valley, as seen in the three villages, are denied access to much of the areas' water sources and are forced to purchase water at a high price over the summer months when their winter reserves run out.

In this region, Israeli civilians consume about 300 cubic metres of water per day while Palestinians consume 70 cubic metres. An ecological pilgrimage to

Sheep drink from a stream in al-Uja, West Bank – 'There can be no peace without justice, which is about the denial of basic human rights such as shelter, water and land,' said Ann Farr of Pax Christi International. 'It is important for people to actually see for themselves the reality of people in Palestine, including the people in this area who are denied use of water.'



witness the disparities and one-sided use of the area's natural resources is an essential part of understanding this reality, said Ann Farr, a member of the board of Pax Christi International as well as Pax Christi UK, who led the group to the Jordan Valley. "There can be no peace without justice, which is about the denial of basic human rights such as shelter, water and land," she said. "It is important for people to actually see for themselves the reality of people in Palestine, including the people in this area who are denied use of water."

According to the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea make up approximately 30 per cent of the West

Bank and are the most significant Palestinian land reserves. But, says the Israeli group, since 1967, Israel has pursued various measures to annex this territory, including the prevention of development of Palestinian communities, systematically destroying homes in Palestinian Bedouin communities, denying access to water and strictly limiting Palestinians' freedom of movement. At the same time, they charge, Israel has exploited the resources of the area for its own needs and allocated generous tracts of land and water resources to Israeli settlements.

As it celebrated its 70th anniversary of peace work, Pax Christi said in a statement it believes there can be no peace with-

out ecological justice. "Armed conflicts and irresponsible natural resource extraction have a significantly negative impact on the way communities interact with their environment – and affect us all," it said. "Pax Christi's vision of peace, based on the Gospel, is one in which the dignity of every human person is unconditionally respected and in which their human rights are fully guaranteed."

Other pilgrimages touched upon the issues of justice and reconciliation, human rights, demilitarisation and disarmament, peace education and women as peacemakers, with participants visiting different areas of the West Bank. The con-

ference also was to include reflective sessions to discuss the topics in depth and to go beyond the local Palestinian situation to connect with global peace issues.

Fasayel, one of the three Palestinian villages in the Jordan Valley, is a perfect example of the consequences of Israel's policies with the area's natural resources, said Rashed Khaled Swafy, coordinator of the popular committee for protecting the Jordan Valley.

He said more than 100 families had left the area because there was no work or water for their agriculture fields and animals.

"When Israel demolishes a tent or confiscates a water tank, they are not only doing it because it is in Area C or because of secu-

urity, they do it just because they want to break the Palestinians' will, but this is one thing they cannot touch, and this is where hope comes from," Swafy said.

One example is teaching the villagers how to build from easily and cheaply produced mud bricks which, if demolished by Israeli order, can be swiftly rebuilt at almost no cost, he said.

Farmers have had to change the crops they grow and reduce the amount of land they farm, which means they end up leaving tracts of land fallow, vulnerable to state-supported confiscation based on an old Ottoman law still enforced here.

The land then gets taken over by Israeli settlements. Sami Dawod of the Palestinian

Hydrology Group noted that his group was working to help the people stay on their lands by building water cisterns, giving water tanks and laying irrigation pipes.

The area is suffering from a double sword, noted Ellen Teague of the Columban Missionaries in Britain, with the difficult natural conditions of the area combined with Israel's water policies.

"Long term, what are the prospects for communities like Fasayel?" she said. In the end she said, the struggle over dwindling resources becomes more acute, increasing conflict in the area. She said it was timely that Pope Francis will be issuing an environmental encyclical in June. He is expected to speak about water issues, climate change and extractive industries, and the tension and conflict arising from fights over resources.

She noted that many peace activists are now linking many issues of peace and environment together.

Ferdinand Djayerombe Vaweke of Development and Peace and Pax Christi Montreal, noted the complexity of the situation.

"Israel claims the whole of the land while Palestinians claim the exact same thing," he said. "And from what I have seen Palestinians are caught and imprisoned in their own land (with their freedom of movement being curtailed.) Yet, it is absolutely important to hear both sides of the story."

He said it was vital to encourage continued dialogue between the two parties even "when they don't feel like they are being heard".

Sending out ambassadors for Christ on SVP mission

ADRIAN ABEL has been a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) for half a century. He joined the Leeds University SVP Conference as a student, and now, 50 years later, he is national president of the SVP in England and Wales.

Although he now has this additional responsibility, he continues to serve as treasurer for his local SVP Conference in Huddersfield. He is keen to point out that being a local member and maintaining his contact with the sick, the isolated, the frail and the lonely, offering friendship and practical assistance is of vital importance to his role as national president: "I see my primary role as being Conference member. That's where the ethos of the Society has its base. Everything else builds on that. I would not like to think of the leader of the SVP who is not a Conference member."

He adds: "I once said to someone I was feeling guilty that I hadn't done many visits because I'd been so busy with paperwork. They said: 'Don't feel guilty, feel deprived.' That captures what it means to be out on the ground with people in need."

Indeed, Adrian is friends with many of the people he visits, referring to them as part of his Vincentian family. He describes how these deep friendships played an important part in his and his wife Mary's healing after their eldest daughter Elizabeth was killed in a car accident at the age of 17. "Many of the people we visited sent cards and flowers and attended our daughter's requiem Mass. They were extremely supportive and it was very moving to witness."

Adrian has two surviving children, a son and a daughter, and three grandchildren. His wife Mary is an active SVP member – she fulfils a part time post of membership officer for the North of England, is the Twinnage Committee representative for Romania and has been heavily involved in the development of the Young Vincentian's SVP 1833 programme. While his household is very SVP orientated with both himself and Mary working on SVP issues at home, family is never neglected: Adrian sees his grandchildren twice a week.

With such a close knit family, Adrian feels passionately about the SVP's work supporting people who do not have family, who live alone, and who are lonely and isolated. He says that the number

PROFILE

SVP national president **Adrian Abel** tells Anita Boniface of his 50 years with the society

of people living on their own is on the increase and describes the conditions in society which make charities like the SVP more important than ever before.

The SVP helps in the absence of the extended family and community that was commonplace in the UK a few decades ago. "I remember my mum describing how when she was young you could leave your door open and it was safe. If a mother went into hospital to have a baby, other mums, neighbours, or extended family would help take care of the children," he says. "We now expect the State to play a role that previously friends, relatives and neighbours played. As the State withdraws their support, the SVP has a bigger role to play."

Adrian says that a lot of the change is due to increased mobility, with people moving away from family to find work. "The State has many resources which can help people when they need it such as the Social Services and the NHS. However, the staff of these bodies do not have time, and it is time that is needed for people who may be isolated and have needs that go beyond their medical or financial conditions. The SVP gives people time. It's not a branch of Social Services, but rather an organisation where those with need become friends in every sense of the word."

As well as providing practical and emotional support to people in need, Adrian points out: "Nor is the SVP frightened of dealing with people's spiritual needs be they Christian or otherwise." He describes how members "make visible Christ's love for all of us" and says this is a calling of the Holy Spirit. "I would like to think that people helped by the Society may just wonder what helps SVP members give of their time and love, and that they will find the answer in a loving Christ. And I would like to think I have brought people back to the Church and been instrumental in people finding Christ."

While Adrian's background as an industrial chemist and managing director could be thought of as being quite distant from the

realm of a Vincentian life, the Vincentian life is high on his agenda. "The ethos of the Society has three strands," Adrian says. "One is that you are trying to seek and find people who may have been forgotten or have needs, and trying to bring Christ's love to them. That is the charity side. But there's another side, which is the spiritual development of the individual and members of the Conference, trying to understand what God wants of us in the vocation that we have chosen. And finally there is the fellowship of being in a Conference and a member of Councils, encouraging colleagues and receiving their encouragement in what we do and indeed on occasions being inspired by what they do."

Encouraging and staying mindful of the SVP England and Wales' 10,000 members is very important to Adrian. As a leader he is aware of the challenges that face the SVP, made up of members who are unpaid and who donate their own time to making the Society work. "One of the difficulties we have is trying to reduce the administration to a minimum and yet conform to all the statutory regulations. When dealing with Conferences, one has to remember that you have to work on the basis that these people are volunteers and should not be overburdened with administrative tasks. This is easy to say but difficult to achieve because on matters such as safeguarding, liabilities, and employment law, we have to observe best working practices and to be experts in diverse fields."

Adrian likens members to 'ambassadors'. "Our members are not just followers, not just disciples, not just apostles, they are ambassadors for Christ. Disciples commit themselves to the leader, whereas an ambassador is sent out by the leader, and puts their own thoughts and point of view into their work. Our members are called to go out and seek those in need and put their own personalities and life experience into the friendships they develop."



The St Vincent de Paul Society's national president Adrian Abel – 'The SVP gives people time. It's not a branch of Social Services, but rather an organisation where those with need become friends in every sense of the word.'

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