

Matthew Bolton speaks with Mimi Brunsdon

Q1: Could you tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to be involved with various NGOs?

I grew up in Leicester in the UK, which had a large and diverse population, including immigrants and refugees from around the world, as well as a radical activist community. Leicester declared itself a Nuclear Free Zone. The bank I walked by on the way to primary school was often graffitied with messages protesting its investment in apartheid South Africa. People spoke often about issues of social justice and peace and engaged in action to make the world a better place. So when I went to Graceland University, I wanted to either become a foreign correspondent or an aid worker. I was a WorldService Corps volunteer in Kenya during one summer break and an intern for Outreach International in Nicaragua and the Philippines the next. I felt compelled to understand more what drives poverty and conflict and what I might be able to do to help. I think I overestimated my abilities, as many white people who want to “help overseas” do. After graduation, I worked as an aid worker in Bosnia for a year, followed by shorter assignments in northern Iraq, Zambia, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic. These experiences, where my language skills were lacking and cultural and political knowledge low, showed me that I needed to learn more about, not just act upon, the world. I went to graduate school and have largely remained in academia since, working as an advocate and consultant for NGOs and UN agencies when there are ways I can help.

Q2: What are the social/political issues you have researched or acted on and why do they matter?

In Bosnia I lived in the Brcko District, which at the time was one of the most landmine-affected areas of the country. Later in northern Iraq, I had the opportunity to conduct an assessment of the excellent local programs providing assistance to landmine survivors. I realized that landmines represented both compelling metaphor and practical reality of the violent legacies of war. In academic research in Laos, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan I have been inspired by the resilience of those working to end the inhumane and indiscriminate effects of automated violence. Addressing landmines and cluster munitions offers a way to address the ongoing consequences of armed conflict, to contribute to reconciliation, economic reconstruction and political confidence building. I also saw the impact that global treaties like the landmine and cluster munition bans have

had in drawing attention to the problem, stigmatizing inhumane weapons and marshalling resources to address their humanitarian effects.

When I moved to New York to work at Pace University, I became involved in the community of advocates working in and around the UN seeking to create more progressive international law mitigating the effects of inhumane weapons and the arms trade.

Q3: Can you tell me about your involvement with ICAN?

Much of my work up until about seven years ago was focused more on the impact of conventional weapons – landmines, cluster munitions, guns, military robotics. But I began talking with activists from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) who wanted replicate the approach NGOs had taken to landmines and cluster munitions and apply it to nuclear weapons. I thought it was a brilliant idea. It had potential transform the staid politics of nuclear arms control by refocusing the discussion on humanitarian and environmental consequences, not just narrow interpretations of strategic security.

From 2014 onwards, my spouse Emily Welty and I have been involved in the UN and NYC advocacy for ICAN. During the 2017 negotiations of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), I was part of the ICAN team that ensured the inclusion of provisions on assisting victims of nuclear weapons use and testing and remediating contaminated environments. As with the landmine treaty, I felt like a treaty that rejected nuclear weapons as abhorrent to humanity also needed to address their impact on affected communities. The Treaty acknowledges the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons activities on Indigenous Peoples, as well as women and girls. Emily, who is Vice Moderator of the World Council of Churches Commission on International Affairs, works on coordinating the interfaith communities involved with ICAN.

The TPNW offers a categorical prohibition on nuclear weapons, which are framed as an affront to international humanitarian, human rights and environmental norms. While it is supported by a majority of the world's countries, including most in the Pacific region which bore much of the brunt of nuclear testing, nuclear-armed and nuclear-allied countries (including Australia) have boycotted it. However, the example of the landmine and cluster

munition treaties shows that stigmatizing weapons as inhumane pariahs can have a normative impact on countries that don't sign on. The US, for example, while opposed to the landmine and cluster munition bans, largely conforms to their provisions. Inhumane weapons ban treaties also tend to drive divestment from manufacturers – we are already seeing that with nuclear weapons since the TPNW's negotiation.

It was such a wonderful surprise when ICAN won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for our work raising global awareness of the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and for mobilizing public pressure for the TPNW. However, it also raised the stakes! We needed to ensure the attention we received was directed toward globalizing the stigmatization of nuclear weapons. We also needed the Treaty to have a demonstrable impact in affected communities. As a result, I have been involved in efforts to research the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear testing in the Pacific, visiting Kiribati, Fiji, Cook Islands, Maohi Nui/French Polynesia, New Zealand and Australia.

In New York, we have been working to get the City Council to join ICAN's Cities Appeal by aligning the City's existing Nuclear Weapons Free Zone with the TPNW's norms and divesting its considerable pension funds from nuclear weapons production and maintenance.

Q4: Who or what has inspired you throughout your advocacy ventures?

I am inspired by the work of communities affected by nuclear weapons activities in the Pacific region, who have kept speaking about the impact that nuclear testing and uranium mining continue to have on people and the environment. Many here in the US, as well as in the UK and France, would prefer to forget about the effects that their nuclear arsenals have already had on people and sacred environments in the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Maohi Nui/French Polynesia, Australia and, through the dispersal of fallout, far beyond.

Just before the pandemic, Emily and I had the wonderful opportunity to hang out in Melbourne for a couple months getting to know some of ICAN's first activists. We were so inspired by their long-term commitment to solidarity with Aboriginal communities who have been harmed by both UK nuclear testing and uranium mining. They also work tirelessly to ensure that Australia's rather hypocritical opposition to the TPNW, despite membership in the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons Free Zone and stated commitment to nuclear disarmament, remains in the news.

Q5: How do you think people can act innovatively to create change?

I think that when we work to address social problems, we must always put those most affected by the situation at the centre of the conversation. There is a slogan in the disability rights community, which I first heard from landmine survivors, that asserts "Nothing about us without us!" Focus on the lives of those most affected motivates people to act in solidarity, as they can see more clearly how a problem plays out in everyday life, in a way they can more easily imagine. But it also helps to check the tendency for political discussions to get lost in abstractions and acronyms.

Q6: What, if anything, has Community of Christ done to promote peace and justice?

I have been encouraged that the Community of Christ signed an important interfaith statement welcoming the entry into force of the TPNW. The statement, which Emily co-coordinated, says "As people of faith, we believe that the possession, development and threat to use nuclear weapons is immoral. There are no safe hands for these weapons. The accidental or deliberate detonation of a nuclear weapon would cause severe, long-lasting and far-reaching harm on all aspects of our lives and our environment throughout the world." It honors "the global hibakusha, survivors whose courage and perseverance serve as our inspiration, guidance, and moral foundation in the quest for a world free from nuclear weapons." And it invites "invite everyone, especially those in communities of faith, to join us in this work for peace, justice, and respect for life—against which nuclear weapons stand in complete opposition—in ways that are meaningful and authentic to your traditions and how you are inspired to participate."

Q7: How can others get involved with the campaign against nuclear weapons?

Church members can get involved in ICAN Australia, which has lots of ways to help out on its website. Some ideas might include learning more about the TPNW and legacies of nuclear testing and uranium mining in Australia, working to get your city or town to join the ICAN Cities Appeal, asking your MPs to join the ICAN Parliamentary Pledge and getting your superannuation funds and banks to divest.



ICAN 2017
NOBEL
PEACE
PRIZE
AUSTRALIA

NINE HEADS OF STATE HAVE THE ABILITY TO LAUNCH MORE THAN 13,000 NUCLEAR WEAPONS BETWEEN THEM, THREATENING ALL LIFE ON THIS PLANET.

TO ADDRESS THIS EXISTENTIAL PERIL, A GLOBAL MAJORITY OF NATIONS NEGOTIATED A TREATY TO FINALLY OUTLAW NUCLEAR WEAPONS. THE 2017 UN TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IS THE CIRCUIT BREAKER TO THE NUCLEAR STATUS QUO. IT IS OUR BEST CHANCE AGAINST OUR WORST WEAPONS.

How to get involved:

- **ICAN Cities Appeal:** <https://icanw.org.au/cities/>
- **Nuclear weapons divestment: Quit Nukes** <https://quitnukes.org>
- **Becoming an ICAN partner organisation:** <https://icanw.org.au/partners/>
- **MAPW health professionals statement:** <https://www.mapw.org.au/nuclear-weapons-ban-treaty-health-professionals-appeal/>
- **Joining the ICAN mailing list, or other enquiries to ICAN:** Director in Australia is Gem Romuld gem@icanw.org
- **Financial help:** <https://icanw.org.au/donate/>