



**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT TO THE BOARD OF STEWARDS FOR
WEEK OF COMPASSION**

Fall 2022

Submitted by Vy Nguyen

Mission: As the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Week of Compassion works with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world.

Vision: A world where God's people transform suffering into hope

Core Values:

- **CONNECTION**
Partner with individuals, congregations, and organizations to serve the needs of the world
- **INTEGRITY**
Honor the commitment to faithful stewardship, ensuring gifts entrusted to Week of Compassion are making the most impact
- **ACCOMPANIMENT**
Embody God's grace by committing to a long-term presence with communities in need

“Cheap reconciliation and superficial unity are not enough. We need to confront ourselves with the world as it is, broken and marked by human sin. You bring with you the pain and the trauma of people suffering from violence and war. You carry the burden of communities divided by hate speech, racism, and ethnic tensions. Your villages and cities, forests like the Amazonia jungle, fields and rivers are deeply affected by the climate emergency and economic exploitation. There is hardly a family that has not been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic....

We are here together because we are called to work hand-in-hand with people of other faiths or of no religious faith who are equally committed to a politics of radical compassion for the end of every single war or conflict, for greater economic justice, for the healing of creation, and for the wellbeing of future generations.”

-Dr. Agnes Abuom, Moderator of the World Council of Churches Central Committee, addressing the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022

Dr. Agnes Abuom spoke these words in front of 5,000 Protestant and Orthodox Christians from around the world at the opening of the WCC Assembly this past September, naming the pain and suffering that exists for so many in the world and for those who carried them on their pilgrimage to the Assembly in Germany. I still think of her words today, especially as the Week of Compassion Board of Stewards is about to meet in person for the first time since the Fall of 2019. The journey these past three years through the pandemic has been challenging in many ways. The work at Week of Compassion serves as a daily reminder of the ways in which lives are changed forever as a result of human-made disasters or, more frequently now, by supernatural storms such as tornadoes, floods or typhoons. In the midst of preparing for this meeting we find ourselves responding to major storms that are devastating many communities and families around the world. We are very aware of the hurricanes that are tremendously impacting Florida and the states along the Gulf and Atlantic, and of course in Puerto Rico as well, where our board meeting will take place. These are not the only storms, as we also hear about major typhoons in the Pacific. These major disasters are in front of us and are on the news, reminding us of the current challenges. Then there are also ongoing disasters that do not make the news and where many already feel forgotten: the political crisis in Afghanistan, extreme floods in Pakistan, hunger and starvation in the Horn of Africa, global refugee crises in Syria and Myanmar, conflict in the Middle East, and much more—all crises to which the church has been called on to care and respond.

Our visit to Puerto Rico was supposed to happen in 2020 to see the work of rebuilding from Hurricane Maria in 2017 that devastated much of the island. At this upcoming meeting, we will continue to see the recovery efforts from 2017 but also think through ways to rebuild from the recent hurricane that took place just a few weeks ago. The partnerships that we have formed in the last several years, as you will see, continue to help Week of Compassion rebuild Puerto Rico.

You will get to interact and see the important work of this ministry, especially in the long-term recovery response, and, unfortunately, see the unique gift that our ministry offers in accompaniment to the many staff and families who have just gone through the recent hurricane. The timing of our visit is a couple of years late, but it's as fitting now as ever as we begin another phase of recovery work.

One important theme that echoed throughout the WCC Assembly was the issue of climate change.

From extreme droughts and a low water level in the Colorado River throughout much of the western US to more tornadoes in the Midwest and milder winters in the North to stronger and more frequent hurricanes, we don't have to look far to find many places in the United States where climate change is tremendously impacting our communities. Until recently we did not see many disasters that caused over a billion dollars in damage, but now it's more of a regular event. Around the world, every region is impacted by climate change—Europe with its wildfires and severe droughts this past summer from the high summer heat, Africa and Asia with their extreme droughts, and the poles with their melting ice caps. For Week of Compassion, addressing climate change will be a high priority as it will impact how we do disaster response, approach global sustainable development, and respond to the number of displaced people. We will see more farmers not being able to grow their own food because of severe droughts and an increase in malnutrition in young families where new famines take place. We will see an increase in people being displaced because they can no longer live on their land due to rising sea levels. In looking at sustainable development projects to support and partners to collaborate with in disaster response, climate change will be a key issue to pay close attention to for Week of Compassion, focusing on both the immediate response and strategizing for a long-term response with our wide network of partners.

The conflict in Ukraine continues to deepen daily and is having the most direct and indirect impact on our work. Many of our partners, especially ACT Alliance, continue to provide emergency assistance along bordering countries and are helping families who have fled Ukraine settle while they are in the transition period. As the conflict continues to unfold, for the next several months, the big concern for our partners will be to get through the winter and provide heat and warm clothes to many families. Indirectly, the conflict in Ukraine is impacting other international programs that were already hurting prior to this conflict. Many partners have already started to reallocate their humanitarian funding away from those needed places in order to focus more on Ukraine. In addition, the global food crisis is only getting worse as a result of food and grains from Ukraine not being able to get to key places. The energy crisis surrounding Europe is also making it more costly for heating this winter as our partners prepare to respond. Collectively, many of our partners have received tremendous funding to respond to Ukraine for the next year and more. Week of Compassion has as well, and we will work closely

with our partners to come up with a long-term plan to provide support where it is most needed. Our primary focus and funding, however, will continue to go toward communities lacking support due to the crisis in Ukraine. Our work will continue to balance what the world is paying attention to as well as the places that are overlooked and to remind one another that the world continues to have other crises that require the church's attention.

As Week of Compassion continues expanding its capacity with new staff and taking on more programs, especially with refugee and immigration work, reviewing the ways in which we do our work in light of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion becomes even more crucial. Since the last board meeting in the spring, the staff has been reviewing the recommendations from the consultants and will slowly implement some of the recommendations in the next several years. There has already been some learning since the spring, and we look forward to sharing with you proposals within Week of Compassion that will strengthen our work in equity and inclusion.

Domestic Program: Natural Disaster and Refugee Work

Since the spring meeting, the staff has continued to adapt to the new organizational structure (including Rev. Hamilton-Arnold's parental leave) and respond to the ever-changing dynamics of disaster and migrant response. Domestically, Week of Compassion has continued to provide support for immediate disaster relief to and through Disciples congregations; engage in long-term disaster recovery through informational and financial support, as well as volunteer coordination; and develop resources and relationships for refugee and immigration response with local congregations. The new organizational structure is meant to connect the ways in which we minister to, support, and respond to these myriad domestic needs as a cohesive ministry. Moving forward, the challenge for Week of Compassion in the work of domestic response will be to ensure that we are continuing to intentionally work internally as one ministry, coordinating with all the manifestations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and collaborating with our ecumenical partners. Until this year, Week of Compassion has never had a staff role focused on refugee work, but relied entirely on collaboration with other General Ministries and ecumenical partners. As Week of Compassion has taken on this role, the new structure is set up to cross-pollinate the disaster and refugee response sectors to better provide support to the most vulnerable communities in times of highest needs. Although natural disaster response and refugee response are varied in many ways, ultimately, both are necessary in order to respond to the needs of vulnerable populations. This new organizational structure is to help the church be prepared and respond as we see the increasing severity and higher frequency of natural disasters while at the same time the numbers of displaced people continues to increase daily.

The staff continues to review and strategize around the recommendations of the DEI report and develop a long-term, sustainable plan for implementation. The initial step in this

multi-year implementation involves Rev. Hamilton-Arnold drafting a solidarity grant policy—for your review at this meeting—formalizing some current grant assessment practices and establishing new criteria to help limit the overall spending on solidarity grants and help direct this assistance to those most in need.

While the DEI process and recommendations do not fully focus on refugee work, there are themes within the recommendations that are similar in refugee work. Rev. Alan Dicken, after administering the grant funds available for congregations engaged in resettling Afghan evacuees, took note of the fact that all of the congregations who applied for the grant were predominantly white churches. The systems that have been in place for refugee work since the beginning of the 1940s, really do not best fit today's world in allowing other voices, especially refugee voices who were resettled here over the last eight decades, to be involved and engaged in refugee and migrant work. Out of this realization and conversations with our ethnic ministry partners, Rev. Dicken developed an Equity Grant that would be geared toward ensuring that all Disciples churches, especially churches that are part of La Obra, National Convocation, and NAPAD have opportunities and funding specifically for their refugee and immigrant responses. There is an understanding that these ministries may not look like the resettlement ministries that the church is traditionally used to. The hope is that many different ministries may flourish as the whole church takes steps towards welcoming our neighbors.

Refugee and natural disaster response require multitudes of partners and collaboration; we do not do this work alone. This summer, Rev. Dicken helped develop a partnership with Connect Ministries and Reach Beyond Mission. These two mission trip hosts had weeks with learning focused on refugee response. Rev. Dicken led a presentation for each group over the summer, including an in person presentation for both groups at the end of July. Conversation is ongoing about a continued partnership with Be The Neighbor (the merger of Connect Ministries and Reach Beyond Mission), where their sites focus on refugee and immigrant issues or disaster recovery.

In an effort to expand and strengthen Week of Compassion ministry toward refugees and migrants, Rev. Dicken has been in conversations with different resettlement agencies around the country. This is to build relationships, and also to build a database of what resources are available to congregations that may be interested in a refugee response. With 20 agencies contacted since May, including four in-person site visits, Rev. Dicken continues to build our capacity to respond quickly to the needs of churches and to refugees entering this country.

Looking ahead, this will be vitally important as the Biden administration has recently recommended a refugee admission ceiling of 125,000 people for FY2023. This is in addition to the US's commitment to resettle an additional 50,000 Afghan evacuees over the next three years. While ceilings do not always translate to actual admissions, the announced 125,000 potential refugee allowances is the highest in over 20 years and creates a huge opportunity for Disciples to be more engaged in the work of resettlement.

Because of a lack of infrastructure to address this huge potential influx in refugees, some of the burden of resettlement will shift significantly to host organizations like the local church sponsors. With Week of Compassion taking on more of the role of refugee and immigrant response for the general church, we will need to be diligent and visible in encouraging congregations to take up this ministry and empowering them to do so.

This work of developing relationships with agencies and congregations alike is already bearing fruit. After visiting the Tampa Church World Service offices, Week of Compassion received a call from the Tampa CWS site coordinator asking if there was a Spanish-speaking Disciples congregation that would serve as a welcoming place and community liaison for a Guatemalan family. Rev. Dicken and Ms. Spratt worked closely to connect and ultimately, La Auditoria Vida en Familia Iglesia was able to respond to the call put out by the Tampa resettlement office. The church continues to show that when called upon, we respond to the needs of our neighbors in our communities.

Knowing that disaster preparedness is especially important for communities of color that do not always have access to trainings and preparedness resources, Week of Compassion is intentionally engaging with National Convocation, NAPAD, and La Obra, including having staff participate at national and regional gatherings. In the case of La Obra, a four part preparedness training was developed in Spanish by Ms. Spratt at the request of the National Hispanic Pastor. The online sessions have had dozens of leaders of Spanish speaking congregations from all over the country.

At the spring Board meeting, Rev. Hamilton-Arnold shared about the launch of a digital tool for connecting and resourcing congregations for disaster preparedness: Willing to Respond. As of this writing, 24 congregations have registered on the platform, including 1 NAPAD congregation and 1 Convocation congregation. In addition to direct follow-up by staff, those congregations receive a preparedness newsletter every other month. Two Regions requested training related to Willing to Respond, and 4 congregations have engaged in more detailed preparedness conversations with Week of Compassion staff after registering. In Colorado, registration has led to connection of 2 previously unconnected churches, referral to chaplaincy resources through DHM, and rapid response following a severe weather incident. Preparedness and response is a cycle that goes hand in hand.

Week of Compassion continues to develop and work with partners to host volunteers. Through the spring and summer both Rev. Hamilton-Arnold and Ms. Spratt oversaw a work site in Dayton, Ohio, supporting New homeownership for renters displaced by the 2019 tornadoes. In collaboration with the United Church of Christ and the Pathways to Homeownership Project, Week of Compassion facilitated 1,489 volunteer hours, from 25 volunteers, working on 3 houses that will be purchased by tornado survivors new to homeownership! For this project, Week of Compassion was awarded a National VOAD/Lowe's Foundation grant for \$30,000 in Lowe's merchandise credit, plus a \$4,200 cash grant for administration. As we have expanded our

programmatic work in domestic disaster recovery, and as these grants have become more frequently available, Week of Compassion is leveraging the benefits of membership with National VOAD on behalf of and in collaboration with local partners. Week Of Compassion recently submitted another grant application through National VOAD to support hurricane Ida recovery among indigenous tribes in southeast Louisiana in collaboration with a Network of local organizations.

Since the last report, there have been four major disaster events in the United States and Canada, as well as multiple localized fires and severe storms:

Flooding in Eastern Kentucky

Flooding in the Greater Saint Louis area

Hurricanes Fiona and Ian

Of note, the response to Hurricane Fiona presented a new opportunity for Week of Compassion to coordinate virtual volunteers for an assistance call center with National VOAD partner, Crisis Cleanup. Week of Compassion is exploring offering this remote volunteer opportunity as a regular part of Disciples' immediate response to domestic disasters. Rev. Hamilton-Arnold would welcome further conversation about developing response plans for these locations, if you are interested in additional details.

Even as new disasters responses unfold, Week of Compassion remains committed to supporting long-term recovery in multiple locations across the country including: southeast Texas (Hurricane Harvey); Louisiana (Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida); Western Kentucky (2021 tornadoes); Colorado (wildfires); and Jacksboro, Texas (2022 tornado); with an emerging partnership in Detroit, Michigan (2021 flooding) and possible partnerships in California and Oregon (wildfires).

In the midst of so many disasters that impact so many lives, here and around the world, we remain grateful for this church and this ministry in responding to one disaster after another. We continue to adapt and adjust to our changing landscape and the changing needs of the church. It is our prayer that as Week of Compassion grows in our understanding and our responses, we do so with an eye towards how to faithfully represent the fullness of the church and all of our potential to respond to loving our neighbors in the best ways possible.