



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT TO THE BOARD OF STEWARDS FOR

WEEK OF COMPASSION

Spring 2021

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

“There is light at the end of the tunnel” is a sentiment shared by many lately as most adults in the US gain access to the vaccine. It’s a light of hope that we share and pray is indeed near and that this pandemic will be behind us soon. We also know that when this pandemic does come to an end, our world will be different than what it was before this began. While we all pray that COVID-19 will end soon, on most days, it does not feel that way due to regular engagement with partners around the world, especially partners right now in India and Brazil, who are seeing COVID-19 cases skyrocket and continue to kill thousands of people daily. The health system and infrastructures in many of these places are crumbling and are unable to provide critical support to patients.

Week of Compassion continues to engage with General Ministries colleagues and ecumenical partners, both domestic and global, as to what will happen next in the areas of relief, refugee, and sustainable development when this pandemic does end. Engaging our partners’ needs to implement our shared vision and mission here and around the world is vital during this time. In some ways, the last year has given us time to think and deepen our relationship with our partners to strategize how we will relate and do the work together in a post-pandemic world. This is a moment for Week of Compassion to evaluate and, if necessary, restructure the way we implement our work.

Over the last several months Week of Compassion has discerned with our partners on the challenges of the pandemic and what we see as the needs both during and post pandemic. The challenges before us are great and will require us to work closely to tackle some of the problems. These engagements have informed and shaped our 5 priorities for the next 18 months or more. These priorities are to help us adapt to the changing landscape but do not limit our support for disaster work or sustainable development around the world. No doubt there are still great needs—communities’ livelihoods are affected by the pandemic, and other emergency reliefs are needed. The priorities focus our work as we hear what our partners need in the coming months and years and set our resources toward meeting those critical needs. The five programmatic priorities are as follows:

1. Domestic- Strengthen our relationship with racial-ethnic ministries and people of color communities and congregations
2. Domestic- Working with regions and congregations to increase disaster preparedness and response work
3. Global- Ending gender-based violence and supporting girls’ education and women’s empowerment (regaining losses due to pandemic)
4. Global- Protection of refugees and migrants
5. Global- Working with partners for the fair distribution of vaccines in nations that do not have resources or access to COVID-19 vaccines.

The increase in the frequency and severity of disasters will further impact communities all over the world. Disasters in the United States and Canada require Week of Compassion to be more hands-on in our response, both in the immediate and long-term recovery. Here in California, we are already preparing for another year of extreme drought and predicting another season of severe wildfires (fire season is now year-round in California). The two priorities for our domestic disaster work—disaster preparedness and strengthening our relationship with ethnic communities—are crucial in moving

forward. Preparing Disciples churches and regions to be disaster-ready will enable the wider church, not just Week of Compassion, to work together in times of disaster to be able to meet the needs of the local community immediately after. More importantly, we will work to ensure that communities not connected to the denominational structures and available resources from the wider church will get the support they need during emergencies. One way of helping us move toward this engagement is for Week of Compassion to become more intentional in how we incorporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into our domestic disaster work. Recently we applied for the Oreon Scott Foundation Grant to help hire an outside consultant to look at our internal practices and give us recommendations to help this ministry better serve our vulnerable communities, especially in the African-American, Hispanic, and Asian communities. The recommendations will help us evaluate the way we provide grant funding, determine if additional staff is required to expand our disaster outreach, and perhaps restructure internally to better reach our target recipients. If the Oreon Scott Grant is approved, we anticipate this work will take 2 years and help us commit to a manageable timeline with an end date and goal. Once the consultant work is completed and recommendations are provided, the results will be shared with the board for review. There will also be a financial commitment for the board to decide on so the recommended actions can be implemented.

The next three priorities focus on global communities and how our partners are changing in their work to meet the needs caused by this pandemic. Many communities have been impacted by this pandemic, but developing nations with limited resources have been impacted heavily. The work Week of Compassion has been doing around women's empowerment and girls' education for the last several decades has had many setbacks due to reduced family income and lost livelihoods, forcing parents to resort to desperate money saving strategies, including a return to harmful traditional practices such as taking girls out of school and into child marriage and even Female Genital Mutilation. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused additional economic problems for communities and families and has thwarted many governmental poverty eradication programs. In addition, there has been an increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV) toward women. The UN Women have called GBV the shadow pandemic. Continuing to invest in women's empowerment and girls' education is even more important now than ever, and we have shared with our partners that we will focus our support as they bring the work that they are doing in this area.

A year into the pandemic, COVID-19 has made its way to every corner of the world. There are now cases recorded in refugee camps in Greece, among Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, in the makeshift camp housing asylum seekers close to the US southern border in Matamoros, Mexico, in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, and in many other locations. The number of recorded infections and deaths is almost certainly undercounted, and there is a good chance that transmission rates have been much higher than reported because of limited testing. The shutdown of borders to contain the virus has only made it worse for many of these refugees. In addition, vaccines have seen limited release outside of the US and Europe. The current situation in India will continue to ~~only~~ get worse in the coming weeks. Focusing our resources to protect refugees, as well as working to advocate the fair distribution of vaccines to developing nations, will only become more crucial in the months ahead in order to help the global community return to safety. On the advocacy side of the fair distribution of vaccines, we have been

supporting and engaging with the Secretariat office of ACT Alliance and coordinating information with the Norwegian Church Aid.

Internal

Week of Compassion staff have not traveled since March of last year, and we anticipate changing this sometime in the near future if conditions improve. Currently, we are following the OGMP's guidelines and will look at possibly lifting the travel restrictions sometime after Labor Day. If conditions improve quickly prior to Labor Day, we will resume travel before then; but if it does not improve, we will consider pushing the restrictions out. We have learned a lot in the last 15 months about how to relate to our churches and partners without having to travel, and we will incorporate these learnings when travel resumes and not rely as heavily on travel as we did before this pandemic. There are different ways to do this work without requiring staff to travel all the time, so we will continue evaluating how to use the current technology as well as travel to connect and support our churches and partners.

Since our last board meeting, where we approved a sabbatical policy, I hoped to take the full 10 weeks of sabbatical this summer. My original plan was to travel to Vietnam with my family for a month to reflect on our journey, story, history, identity, and family connection. My wife has not been back to Vietnam since she fled the country as a child, and this visit would have been the first for my son. Due to the pandemic continuing to worsen in many places, including Vietnam, the visit this summer is not possible. In consultation with the Executive Committee, we will be splitting my sabbatical into two phases, where I will take 5 weeks this July and another 5 weeks next summer, when I hope to be able to journey back to Vietnam. Over the last year, the staff and I have been working on contingency plans and will put the plan on a test run when I am on sabbatical.

COVID-19 Response

We continue to support local churches in their food pantry programs during this pandemic as they support people within their community during this difficult time. Internationally, our partners continue to send us appeals in places that are overwhelmed by COVID-19. We continue to provide emergency grants for food, water, sanitation, and other needs for communities heavily impacted by this pandemic. A week ago, Week of Compassion sent additional grants to our partners in India and the Middle East for their COVID-19 response. We will continue to stay connected to our partners as they respond to COVID-19 in their local context and will continue to receive COVID-19 designated gifts.

Refugee and Immigration

Many faith communities around the country have been waiting for President Biden to fulfill his promise to restore and strengthen the refugee resettlement program after years of the previous administration trying to completely dismantle this program that faith communities helped build. In April, the current administration decided to keep the refugee admission ceiling to the same

low number under the last administration, making it the lowest number of resettlement in US history. Due to pressure from many organizations, the current administration reversed their decision and recently announced that it would increase the ceiling to 62,500 with 4 months left in this fiscal year. The Biden administration waited too long to sign the Presidential Determination for Refugee Admissions, setting back the process to rebuild the refugee program by three months. These delays will make it impossible to meet the goal of 62,500 for this Fiscal Year, which ends September 30th, and proves that we must continue to increase pressure on the administration to follow through with their commitment for the 125,000 goal in Fiscal Year 2022. Please read Rev. Sharon Stanley-Rea's report for a detailed update on the current refugee work.

The situation along the borders and specifically surrounding unaccompanied children have caught the current administration off guard. Many of our partners, including CWS, are engaging in this work and expanding their support. The issue of families crossing the southern borders and families being separated is expected to increase for the next several years. Week of Compassion has provided grants to CWS to expand their case management services and their phone banks due to an increase in phone calls they are receiving when families cross the border. We continue to engage with Southwest Samaritan Good ministries as they provide transportation, food, and shelter to migrants at the Southern Texas border. Our partners at Children Disaster Services are engaging with some of our churches in McAllen to provide spiritual, emotional, and mental support to unaccompanied children. Please read Natalie Teague, our legal counsel, and her report on her work.

Domestic Disaster

The last several months have witnessed significant operational change for our domestic disaster response work, as we have taken on responsibility for coordinating disaster-related volunteer efforts for the Disciples of Christ, which was previously carried out through partnership with Disciples Volunteering. Rev. Josh Baird, who served as a site coordinator along the gulf coast after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and as Director of Disciples Volunteering for the past decade, was called last fall to lead the Global HOPE team for the United Church of Christ. This move precipitated a realignment of the denominational disaster response ministries--something that had been under consideration for several years.

Caroline has been working on the logistics of the transition, so that volunteers and partners experience minimal disruption. The suspension of volunteer mission teams due to the pandemic has provided space for this transition. As we, in collaboration with local and ecumenical partners, resume volunteer mission opportunities, we are building out a variety of volunteer options for Disciples, with varying degrees of operational involvement from Week of Compassion staff. Per the recommendation of the executive committee, Week of Compassion will require all volunteers who are eligible to receive the COVID-19

vaccine to do so by 2 weeks prior to serving. Additionally, our local partners are enforcing site-specific COVID-19 protocols. A [volunteer page](#) is now live on the Week of Compassion website.

Both stated domestic priorities are informing the work of identifying volunteer opportunities and developing the process of recruiting and engaging volunteers. Caroline hopes that volunteer groups will be inspired to increase disaster preparedness in their own congregations and is thinking about how to encourage those “next steps.” Additionally, she has begun thinking about how to involve long-term volunteers in developing and supporting a disaster preparedness and response framework.

Long-Term Recovery support--including grants and volunteer opportunities--is ongoing in several communities. For a full list of ongoing recoveries, see [the attached document](#).

Some exciting developments since the fall meeting include:

- West Street Recovery; TX -- West Street Recovery is a grass-roots recovery organization serving four marginalized zip-codes in Northeast Houston. They take a multifaceted approach to disaster recovery (in response to Hurricane Harvey, Tropical Storm Imelda, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2021 Winter Storm), involving home repair, skills training (primarily in construction) and hyper-local hiring, community organizing and advocacy, and disaster preparedness/resilience trainings. In addition to grant support, Week of Compassion has collaborated with WSR to present a workshop at the National VOAD annual conference, highlighting community research about survivor experiences in Northeast Houston.
- Immokalee Fair Housing Alliance; FL -- IFHA is an initiative that aims to provide affordable rental housing for low-income families, especially farmworkers in the Immokalee community, who are currently living in substandard housing damaged by Hurricane Irma in 2017.
- Eastwick Unmet Needs Roundtable; PA -- A neighborhood in southwest Philadelphia, Eastwick is a historically marginalized and underserved area. Eastwick is a PADEP-designated Environmental Justice community due to the high environmental burden with which residents live, and it is a high-risk area for flooding. The EUNR is a collaboration between several local churches, community groups, and nonprofits, (including the disaster ministries of the United Church of Christ); they are coordinating home repairs and replacement of critical systems like heating and water. Current volunteer efforts are limited to local groups, though the efforts may be expanded in the coming months.

In line with the priority for developing a Disaster Preparedness and Response Framework, Caroline continues to promote congregational preparedness and provide virtual trainings for congregations and leaders. She was recently invited to host a national webinar for Creation Justice Ministries, approaching congregational preparedness as part of our collective actions in response to the climate crisis. In April, she hosted a disaster preparedness training for church leaders in North Texas, with follow-up sessions in development for asset-mapping. Trainings are also in process for leaders in the Oregon/Idaho and Ohio Regions. In order to expand the reach and impact of these trainings, Caroline is starting to design a train-the-trainers model.

The COVID-19 assistance grants for Disciples households and congregations have been another significant avenue of domestic response since the fall meeting. Since October, Week of Compassion has provided an additional \$30,000 to Disciples feeding ministries. In Q4 of 2020, Week of Compassion provided just over \$3000 to households experiencing financial hardship due the pandemic; we suspended the Household Solidarity Grant for Income Loss program at the end of 2020. These programs were well-received and provided an avenue for stronger relationships with churches in the three racial-ethnic ministries, as they received ~90% of household grants and ~45% of feeding ministry grants.

Because of her relationships with National VOAD and FEMA, Caroline has helped share information with the wider church about federal COVID-19 assistance programs and opportunities for churches to support vaccination efforts.

Caroline was recently reelected for another 1-year term as Chair of the Community Preparedness Committee of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster and continues as Vice Chair of the CWS DHA Advisory Group. She is also a member of the Steering Committee for Disaster Recovery Support Initiative, a program launched in collaboration with the United Church of Christ and Brethren Disaster Ministries, which is now part of the CWS Domestic Disaster Program.

Major Disaster Responses since Fall 2020 Meeting:

- Hurricane Delta; Louisiana (October) -- This Category 2 Hurricane made landfall less than 20 miles east of where Laura made landfall about 6 weeks prior. The inland track was similar, just slightly farther east, compounding the damage from the earlier storm. This storm caused more extensive flood damage. Long-term recovery engagement is likely, through partnerships outlined above.
- Hurricanes Zeta; Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama (October) -- Hurricane Zeta made landfall as a Category 2 Hurricane in eastern Louisiana, tracking across Mississippi and Alabama, complicating the ongoing recoveries from Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Sally. We are in conversation with local Disciples congregations about long-term recovery engagement. Supporting formation of long-term recovery group in Southwest Alabama through DRSI.
- Tropical Storm Eta; Florida (November) -- After causing incredible destruction in Central America as a Category 4 Hurricane, this storm reorganized over the Gulf and meandered before crossing Florida as a tropical storm. Though the storm was not severe in Florida, it affected areas still in recovery from Hurricane Michael (2018) and Hurricane Irma (2017). We have provided additional support to local LTRG partners.
- Winter Storm; Texas, Oklahoma (February): An historic winter storm, with several days of sub-freezing (and sub-zero) temperatures led to widespread infrastructure failures in Texas and Oklahoma. Power outages led to pipe damage in tens of thousands of homes and other buildings. We are in conversation with Regional leadership and local congregations about ongoing involvement.
- Flooding, Hawaii (March) -- Days of inundating rain caused severe flooding on multiple Hawaiian islands. We have provided assistance through the Disciples congregation in Kailua and are in conversation with ecumenical partners about long-term recovery support.

- Tornado outbreaks; Alabama (January and March) -- Two major outbreaks of tornadoes caused significant damage in multiple areas of Alabama, including around Tuscaloosa and Birmingham. We are assessing potential avenues for long-term engagement.

Marketing and Communications

Over the past year, Week of Compassion communications have evolved alongside needs of congregations and communities. As the new reality of COVID-19 shifted worship practices and ministry life, Erin developed social media content and updates to engage churches, donors and leaders in Week of Compassion's ongoing mission as they faced their own internal challenges. The goal was to convey the urgency of needs related to the pandemic (and its economic impact) while also balancing information about ongoing projects; and the continued need for disaster response as historic hurricane and wildfire seasons created compound disaster situations in many communities.

Over the past quarter, communications have focused on showing the complexity of compounding domestic crises, lifting up the ways in which local Disciples churches have stepped up and served their neighbors during this critical time--with support from Week of Compassion. At the same time, we balance stories and posts of domestic responses with those that demonstrate Week of Compassion's ongoing commitment to global presence and development work. Our message has consistently emphasized that we support our partners as they adapt ongoing work to meet needs and face the added challenges of the pandemic. That support for development work will be critical moving forward as global economies begin to recover from the pandemic season, when many programs had to scale back or even cease operations entirely. Across all of our communications, we are naming development needs--particularly related to refugees and women's empowerment--intentionally as mission priorities for 2021.

Erin continues to expand social media reach, growing existing platforms and also cultivating newer spaces. Consistent posting across platforms, as well as regular email updates, remain primary connection points. Additionally, video content has become increasingly important as churches worshiped remotely for a prolonged period of time. It appears as though this shift will remain relevant; even as churches return to in-person worship, many are planning to keep remote worship as an option. Our communications leaned heavily on video during the fall COVID-19 appeal and the Special Offering.

Current social media reach:

<i>Platform</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Increase Since Fall '20</i>
Facebook	7849	106
Twitter	2185	51
Instagram	690	118
YouTube	*46	16

*On YouTube, we monitor both subscribers (of which we now have 46) and views per month. As video becomes more important as a means of connection, knowing how many users viewed our content in a month gives a sense of how the platform is growing. As views and subscribers grow, we are better able to customize aspects of the channel that will give Week of Compassion increased visibility in search results. Having just launched the Week of Compassion YouTube channel in 2020, the platform has grown from having an average of 20-some views a month, to consistently having over 100, with views in February being over 1000. This shows that viewers were especially engaged through video during Special Offering time, and this data will inform how we plan and share resources in the future.

Across platforms, Erin is monitoring social media benchmarks based on factors other than just number of followers. Having monitored both usage and engagement through “Key Performance Indicators” for over a year now, we can see trends related to engagement, overall platform growth, and what topics and type of content get the most traction. Moving forward, this data will be incorporated as part of an overall communications strategy.

Posts related to domestic disaster response continue to get the highest engagement. Top performing posts from the past 2 quarters include:

- December, End of Year Video Message from the Executive Director
 - Reach of 4.8k on Facebook (boosted), and more than 200 views on YouTube
- February, Infographic reflecting 2020 financial distribution
 - Reach of 2.5k on Facebook, 260+ impressions on Instagram
- February, Various updates related to Texas winter storms
 - Combined reach of more than 5k on Facebook

Since staff were not able to travel during Special Offering time this year, priority was given not only to digital resources, but direct engagement through video as well. In addition to the prepared worship resources and pre-recorded video sermons, staff responded to many requests for live or customized worship appearances. In this way, staff was able to directly engage with even more congregations than would be possible in a normal year.

While there are no firm plans for resuming staff travel again, Erin is scheduled to speak at the Kansas Regional Assembly in August-- if an in-person visit is still not advisable, Erin will preach remotely for the gathering. Staff anticipate more opportunities for regional gatherings in the coming months, as well as participation in the virtual, denomination-wide gathering in August.

Plans are in the works for a summer virtual event as well. The online gathering will feature partners and friends of Week of Compassion, telling stories about the power of food in building community, followed by a roundtable discussion about food security and, more specifically, how Week of Compassion responses support food security worldwide. The evening will be part entertainment and fellowship, part education and advocacy, with the overall goal of promoting engagement, since the usual opportunities for gathering at General Assembly will not be possible this year.

Development

In the last quarter, 2 congregations have joined the Circle of Compassion, bringing the total number of churches up to 63. We celebrate that First Christian Church of Bloomington, Indiana, and Beargrass Christian Church of Louisville, Kentucky, have made a commitment to support Week of Compassion through a named endowment fund. In spite of a shift in Week of Compassion development priorities brought about by COVID-19, (assuming that the time was not right to approach congregations about over-and-above giving commitments during closures), these churches stepped up and made a commitment during an uncertain time, based on seeds planted before the pandemic.

As churches begin to resume (or consider) in-person worship and activities, Erin and the Development Team are working on a summer/fall Circle of Compassion emphasis, reaching out individually to identified congregations, then following up with mailed info packets. Through this effort, congregations will learn the importance of endowment funding for the future sustainability of Week of Compassion's mission and hopefully be inspired by the impact that their local ministry can have as part of our wider church's global presence.

Erin continues to build relationships with pastors and congregational leaders, while also maintaining contact with recurring donors and endowment supporters. Week of Compassion has received or been notified of several large bequests in the past year that will further secure a stream of reliable income for the future. These types of gifts, as well as the congregational and individual endowment funds, continue to build a strong foundation over and above Special Offering income that will sustain Week of Compassion's mission for years to come.

Looking ahead to the 2022 Special Offering, Erin is already working, along with our OGHS ecumenical partners, on theme and resource development for next year. The theme, "Love Is..." will focus on recovery from the pandemic as well as other domestic disasters; while also demonstrating continued commitment to international development programs and responses supporting some of the most vulnerable populations in the world.

Internally, staff is thinking about how to maintain some modifications made during the pandemic to make materials more accessible and approachable, while still meeting the needs of congregations that prefer print materials and may not fully utilize digital resources. As we move forward from this season of doing everything remotely, we will continue intentional communication, preparing to engage as many congregations as possible in the annual offering using a variety of platforms and mediums.