

## **Program Update - Spring 2023 meeting to the Week of Compassion Board of Stewards**

### **Domestic Disaster Response - led by Caroline Hamilton-Arnold**

The demands on the domestic disaster response work of Week of Compassion continue to be immense. Since the fall meeting, winter storms and extreme temperatures at the end of December caused damage across much of the United States; successive atmospheric rivers brought record rain, snow, and flooding to California; earthquakes in Humboldt County, CA damaged hundreds of homes; and multiple tornado outbreaks in January and March caused significant damage in AL, AR, GA, IL, IN, MS, and TN. In many of these locations, Disciples congregations were directly affected and/or involved in providing relief. Week of Compassion has been supporting those congregations and will continue to be in conversation with them about engagement with Long-Term Recovery. In AL and MS, however, the Disciples connections were more limited, which underscores the need for Week of Compassion to continue building strategic partnerships with organizations in areas of high vulnerability.

One such partnership is with R3SM - a local organization in central MS - that is helping launch long-term recovery groups in multiple high-risk counties. Week of Compassion has provided an organizational support grant for that work, and we continue to explore other ways to collaborate with R3SM and connect the Great River Region in these efforts.

As the work with R3SM suggests, long-term recovery remains the primary area of focus for our domestic disaster program. Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold recently joined the Long-Term Recovery Group Committee of National VOAD, as Ms. Raiza Spratt is now representing the Disciples of Christ on the Community Preparedness and Volunteer Committees. Rev. Hamilton-Arnold also continues to work with a task force of National VOAD tasked with mapping long-term recovery groups nationwide.

Long-term recovery support continues in southeast Texas (Hurricane Harvey); Louisiana (Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida); Kentucky (2021 tornadoes and 2022 floods); Oregon (2020 wildfires); California (earthquakes); and Florida (Hurricane Ian). Plans are taking shape for our continued support of hurricane recovery in Puerto Rico.

Through National VOAD, Week of Compassion received a full grant award of \$7,500 from the UPS Foundation to support our collaboration with The Indigenous Resilience Disaster Case Management Program (IR-DCMP) in response to Hurricane Ida in Southeast Louisiana. In April, we received a \$25,000 in-kind grant from the Lowe's Foundation, also through National VOAD, with a \$3,500 cash award for administration, to support a collaborative effort with Volusia Interfaiths/Agencies Active in Disaster and the UCC Disaster Ministries for Hurricane Ian recovery in Volusia County, FL.

At the fall meeting, the Board of Stewards approved a Solidarity Grant Policy and received a draft procedure for Household Solidarity Grants. Over the past several months, as Week of Compassion implemented the Household Solidarity Grant procedure, we encountered several challenges, especially related to gathering income data. Multiple pastors named their sadness that they could not offer assistance to all of the affected members in their congregations, noting they have valued in the past being able to lift up broadly these grants as a gift of love from the wider church. In response, Week of Compassion adjusted the Household Solidarity Grant procedure to provide \$250 to any Disciples

household that sustains home damage or significant financial hardship due to a natural or human-caused disaster. Alongside these blanket grants, we are piloting a Disaster Disparity Grant which would be available to lay Disciples of color. These grants are intended to help address the documented disparities in disaster recovery resources directed to marginalized racial/ethnic communities, in line with the priorities that emerged from our equity review.

### **Immigration and Refugee Response** - led by Alan Dicken

At the beginning of 2021, Week of Compassion expanded greatly, hiring two new staff members and organizing under a new staff structure. After a year of living into this new model, it is clear that there are incredible benefits to being able to have additional ministry touchpoints with the church and with those experiencing both natural and human-made disasters in the world. The ministry continues to live into this vision of expanded ministry and greater impact in serving the church.

In the past year, Rev. Alan Dicken has had conversations with 95 different congregations that have been involved in, or are looking to become involved in refugee response, Afghan evacuee support, and/or support for asylum seekers. Over 50 of these churches have been actively involved in resettling over 100 refugees and supporting the basic needs of an additional 250+ refugees and immigrants through community partners. These congregations span 25 different regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and represent churches affiliated with La Obra, NAPAD, and Convocation.

Much of this work has come through the development of relationships with resettlement agencies around the country. Rev. Dicken has visited or been in contact with over 50 agencies and is frequently asked to connect Disciples with the needs of agencies from Tampa to San Diego to New York City.

Additionally, Week of Compassion developed an Equity in Refugee Response Grant to distribute funds to congregations from La Obra, NAPAD, and Convocation to engage in refugee and asylum support responses that may not be traditional resettlement responses. While resettlement is a valuable part of many church ministries, those who engage in resettlement and who have connected with Week of Compassion for the Afghan Welcome Grant are traditionally white and typically more affluent congregations. The Equity Grant is a way to ensure Week of Compassion is valuing the ministries of non-white congregations when their ministry may not fit within the traditional molds of familiar grant structures and opportunities within the church. To date, four congregations have received funding of \$2,500 each to engage in refugee and asylum response ministries.

With increased migration happening at the southern border of the United States especially as COVID-19 restrictions have eased, there has been a need for Week of Compassion to direct attention and resources to ministries happening at the border in support of vulnerable populations of migrants crossing into the U.S. To that end, Rev. Dicken along with Rev. Nguyen traveled to Tucson to visit with leaders in the Arizona Region in March of 2023. In collaboration between local pastors, the Arizona Region, and Week of Compassion, there is a Border Response being developed.

The Border Response includes an immersion education component for Disciples looking to better understand life in the borderlands, job training for asylum seekers recently arrived in the U.S. and sheltering and offering resources to those who have crossed the border and have been left without support from a promised sponsor. Week of Compassion is looking to offer a three year pilot program to

effectively engage Disciples across the breadth of the church to become involved in learning more about the realities at the border, how local congregations are living out faithful ministries of asylum support, and how congregations can be involved, even if they are inland and do not consider themselves to be geographically a part of a border ministry.

Week of Compassion continues to be invested along the entirety of the border, including engagement with Be The Neighbor sites in Fort Worth and Tucson, as well as with Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries (SWGSM). Be the Neighbor is a Disciples based mission trip facilitating organization that has sites across the country, with specific social justice themes associated with each location. SWGSM is a ministry of the Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that focuses on assisting refugees and asylum seekers with support for immediate needs and transportation to inland destinations. The SWGSM board extended an invitation for Rev. Alan Dicken to join in their Spring Meeting. Their board is in a process of discernment about their leadership and is in conversation with Week of Compassion regarding how best to support this vital border ministry of the church.

Week of Compassion has been hosting monthly Refugee Congregation Gatherings. These monthly virtual gatherings came out of the expression and feedback from congregations feeling isolated and wondering how to connect with other Disciples doing the work of refugee support. The gatherings have been a source of community for churches involved in refugee resettlement work, Afghan evacuee support, and those who have yet to participate, but are curious to learn more about the process and how to get involved. Each month has seen new people join and many returning participants, indicating how important these conversations and connections are for those who are involved.

The need for connections between local congregations and resettlement agencies continues to rise. Through associations with Church World Service Remote Placement Response and the Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Week of Compassion was able to facilitate a quick connection between CWS and FCC Lubbock. There was a need for a quick sponsorship relationship to develop to facilitate bringing a refugee from Myanmar over before court deadlines expired. The quick work of Week of Compassion, CWS, and the Southwest Region, resulted in FCC Lubbock helping to sponsor a refugee, a bat scientist, who will start working at Texas Tech this summer.

As another way to lift up the issue of refugee awareness, Week of Compassion is preparing a shared worship service with the United Church of Christ which will be streamed on June 20, 2023, for World Refugee Day. Additionally, components of the service will also be available for digital download for congregations to use in their own worship service celebrations honoring World Refugee Day.

### **Disaster Response Organizing - led by Raiza Spratt**

As a denomination, Disciples seeks to be a faithful church that demonstrates true community, known for our ecumenical partnerships, our service to all, and an expandable table where all are welcomed. These are the guiding principles that are shaping our volunteer and preparedness programs.

Volunteers offer powerful witness and relief to the church and communities that are impacted by disasters. These volunteers help expand the reach and impact the church has to carry out the mission of transforming suffering into hope. In the spring and summer of 2022, Week of Compassion hosted a rich collaboration supporting Tornado Survivor Pathways to Homeownership in Dayton, OH.

At that same time, Week of Compassion referred other groups to projects managed and hosted by ecumenical partners (our partner sites) and though Week of Compassion does not currently have a reliable way of tracking those referrals, we know at least six Disciples groups that volunteered their time in disaster rebuilds. One such group was Speedway Christian Church, who brought an intergenerational group to Princeton, KY. In the words of the homeowner, “the group took time to bless the house and my family... It is experiences like this that remind me how fortunate I am to have crossed paths with you and your group. I plan to hang the list of names of individuals in your group on the inside of the wall near notes of others.”

In order to expand our reach, the volunteer base has to reflect the breadth of the communities we serve. Thus we’ve started to expand the variety of volunteer opportunities and mindfully reduce the barriers for volunteers to serve when appropriate. For example, in the past year we have offered:

- virtual disaster response volunteer options that have lower costs, greater flexibility, and broader accessibility
- opportunities for Week of Compassion board members to share their experience resettling refugees

At General Assembly, we are working with the local missions committee to host a house-build in the exhibit hall, which provides a volunteer opportunity for all ages and skill levels.

To build and strengthen the volunteer network within the church, Week of Compassion, led by Ms. Spratt, has been working and building on a volunteer management database. Volunteer Local (the software) will help Week of Compassion deepen our relationships with volunteers by allowing a way to capture new and recurring volunteers’ interest, bring efficiency in the way communication flows with volunteers, and help us tell the story of Disciples active within disaster recoveries.

An example of Volunteer Local helping to strengthen Week of Compassion’s disaster response: In the fall of 2022, the registration process for volunteers interested in responding to a disaster was inefficient and volunteer interest was also hard to track on spreadsheets. Once Volunteer Local was implemented, within 6 hours of launching a virtual volunteer opportunity, we had 3 volunteers registered for a virtual response. The experience was smoother for the volunteers and less demanding of staff time. With more efficiency, Week of Compassion staff hours could be redirected from administrative tasks to more relational work and developing meaningful experiences for volunteers.

To help build the capacity of our congregations to respond to disasters, Week of Compassion has offered and facilitated multiple disaster trainings and expanded the preparedness tools. In the past year, Week of Compassion led three regional/cluster disaster preparedness trainings (North Texas, Oregon, and Florida) and a training for La Obra leaders in Spanish. Staff also helped guide preparedness conversations in four other congregations from three additional regions, launched Willing to Respond, and launched a Survey to Map Congregational Assets within the wider church.

Willing to Respond - an online registry and resource hub for disaster preparedness, which Week of Compassion helped launch with ecumenical partners last year - has been a valuable tool for connecting congregations to other partners, churches, and resources for disaster preparedness and response. Heart of the Rockies Christian Church is a great example of how Willing to Respond helps Week of Compassion support local congregations. After Heart of the Rockies registered as a Willing to

Respond congregation, Week of Compassion staff were able to introduce them to conversation partners within their region and connect them with Disciples resources for a disaster chaplaincy program they were starting in their town. Additionally, because of the relationship established through Willing to Respond, Week of Compassion provided information and grant funding for refugee resettlement support when Heart of the Rockies expressed interest. What's more, when a severe storm occurred, Heart of the Rockies was both prepared to respond and had a relationship built with Week of Compassion that enabled rapid access to solidarity grants. Preparedness and response go hand in hand.

Two priorities for Week of Compassion within the disaster response portfolio are disaster preparedness and volunteer coordination; expanding both of these areas is critical for effective disaster response. There have been challenges in these areas for a variety of reasons, including the small pool of volunteers and resistance to the Week of Compassion COVID-19 vaccination policy. Over the next several years, the hope is to build these programs so churches across the country can respond in times of disaster. In the near future, the Board of Stewards will receive information about plans to continue building a foundation and structure for the volunteer program within Week of Compassion.

#### **Communications and Development** - led by Courtney Richards

The 2023 Special Offering, "[Rise Up Anew](#)", was Week of Compassion's first venture outside the OGHS shared resources table, creating all offering materials 'in house' (Rev. Courtney Richards, contracted Disciples writers, Liz Myer (SALT+), and Hilary Rhodes Design). We had great response to both aesthetic and content, including having everything downloadable, and ready-to-share social media content. The theme videos were used by many congregations; this year, the theme video was also available with a Spanish voiceover, not just in English with Spanish subtitles. We continue to refine the processes by which our congregations receive the printed Special Offering materials, both through 'standing orders' (churches that have said 'send us materials every year') and follow-up orders (churches that do not have standing orders, or request additional materials); 2024 will include a new print/ship contractor.

In addition, there is traffic to the Special Offering archive online, which is impetus for a coming expansion of resources. Using the Special Offering theme as an 'annual theme' focus, Week of Compassion will create worship, study, and activity resources that lift up the work of this ministry, for use beyond the Special Offering 'season.' Carrying the 'Rise Up Anew' theme, a few materials will be available at General Assembly, with the plan to do the same expanded model with the 2024 theme.

The 2024 Special Offering theme is still in development as of this writing. 2024 will be Week of Compassion's 80th anniversary year (more on that below). There is thought of tying a scriptural emphasis (the widow's mite? The mustard seed?) to the Week of Compassion story as one of growth/expansion from a *Day* of Compassion with a single focus (war relief), to a week-long special offering, to a full ministry within the general and ecumenical circles as we presently serve.

The primary public-facing communication from and about Week of Compassion includes: general interest emails sent every other week, an active and up-to-date website, and daily (weekday) social media posts on the three primary platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Rev. Richards will be working this year to fine-tune that primary email experience, both in aesthetics and content (static vs. dynamic).

The *email* list is currently about 3500 active email addresses, with an open rate of about 36% (up 6% from previous year). Our goal is to increase both numbers significantly. The *website* is being continually evaluated and updated; a revision to the Volunteer page is in the works, and additional resource pages (General Assembly, Equity Grant, etc) are created as needed. We continue to assess the best use of *social media*: currently content is simultaneous and duplicated across platforms; Rev. Richards is considering best practices of common content vs. targeting by platform. Across all communication venues, the intent is always to connect our ministry and our community through storytelling, for edification and amplification, and to tell a unified story of intersecting circumstances, communities, and responses.

In addition to congregational and individual giving, Week of Compassion remains vital and empowered by the strength of our endowment fund held at the Christian Church Foundation. As of 12/31/2022, the market value of the TOTAL Week of Compassion endowment fund is \$7Million:

- General Endowment Fund = \$1.1Million
- Named Endowment Funds = \$4.2Million
- Circle of Compassion Funds = \$1.7Million

Alongside the Week of Compassion *General Endowment*, CCF holds on our behalf 259 *named permanent funds*, adding 17 funds since January 2022.

- 2022: 13 new WOC named funds, (1 memorial, 2 legacy churches);
- YTD 2023: 4 new WOC named funds (2 memorial)

Of that 259, the *Circle of Compassion* includes 74 funds, adding 7 funds since January 2022.

- 2022: Peachtree Corners CC (legacy), Norcross GA; First CC, Charlotte NC; First CC, Chattanooga TN; First CC Crawfordsville; Saint Andrew CC, Olathe KS
- YTD 2023: West Mesa CC, Albuquerque NM; Illinois Valley Cluster, IL
- There are currently two congregations in process (anticipating establishing gifts during Q2 2023), and four congregations or clusters in slower conversation.

Additionally, in 2022 and YTD 2023, CCF added 5 new funds with WOC as a beneficiary.

An additional interesting measure of generosity is *recurring gifts*, monthly or quarterly automatic gifts. We also have a number of donors who are 'pattern' givers, both online and offline, who give regularly, but via manual online gift or mailed check. (Rev. Richards will be doing more to track and attend to these contributors in the coming year.) In 2022, Week of Compassion received 95-100 recurring gifts each month; YTD 2023, that has increased to 100-105 gifts - AND one monthly gift doubled! Continuing that pattern would make a great annual increase!

At present, the Development Committee of the Board of Stewards sends handwritten personalized thank you notes (around Feb 1) to Week of Compassion's top 100 giving congregations. As the Development Committee prepares to write their notes and often throughout the year, they keep track of the church's ministers, note pastoral changes, the church's website and social media presence, and other relational information. Perhaps an expanded role of this Committee might include ways to encourage and celebrate new giving congregations, recently reconnected churches, or significant designated gifts.

2024 will mark Week of Compassion's 80th anniversary year. Week of Compassion is considering several communications and generosity connections to mark the occasion:

- A goal of 80 Circle of Compassion churches *this* year (2023) so that we reach "80 by 80".
- Using the 80th anniversary as a connecting point for the Special Offering 2024 theme.
- Update the existing historical timeline; high-graphic, low-text format (more visually appealing, more likely to be seen and shared).
- Monthly series highlighting key events along the timeline and/or 'Where are they now?' series on earlier projects and partners.
- Photo retrospective of early offering materials, posters, etc.
- Some kind of giving tie-in. (new gifts? Legacy society? gifts of \$80?)
- *80 Years of Everyday Compassion?*
  - Everyday compassion. (description)
  - Every Day Compassion (identification)
  - Every day, compassion. (instruction)