

Supportive crowd greets Nuns on the Bus in Indiana

Catherine M. Odell | Jun. 25, 2012

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Sr. Marge Clark, Sr. Mary Wendeln and Sr. Simone Campbell pose in front of their bus in South Bend, Ind.

SOUTH BEND, Ind. -- The Nuns on the Bus rolled into South Bend, Ind., on Thursday evening to find the same sort of enthusiastic crowds that often greet Notre Dame teams coming home after big wins on the road. The 14-day, nine-state bus tour started in Ames, Iowa, on June 18 and was reportedly gaining plenty of fans along its route.

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, major spokeswoman for the touring sisters and executive director of NETWORK, a 40-year-old Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington, D.C., said she and her three bus-riding sisters were just a little weary.

"I feel like the baton being passed along in a relay race," she laughed, "and this is only day four."

The four nuns, representing three different religious communities, are traveling for NETWORK on a full-sized, brightly painted, state-of-the-art bus. Certainly drawing questions and crowds everywhere they stopped, the nuns hadn't quite gotten used to their new status as celebrities of a different sort. Many attendees heard about the touring sisters' project on PBS. Others had seen or heard about Campbell's [sparring with Stephen Colbert](#) [1] on his television show. (Tongue in cheek, Colbert had accused Campbell and the other sisters of being "radical, feminist nuns." Later, he conceded that the bus trip was a bold initiative. "That's a movie, right there: nuns on a bus.")

Despite the show-stopping bus carrying them from city to city and event to event, the nuns were aware that the lifestyle presented insecurities. The sisters -- Campbell; Sr. Marge Clark, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Dubuque, Iowa; Social Service Sr. Diane Donoghue from California; and Sr. Mary Wendeln, a Precious Blood Sister from Dayton, Ohio -- said they are living on trust.

They trust they will have a place to sleep each night. They also count on people -- people they didn't even know -- to arrange venues where they can share NETWORK's message, visit Catholic-sponsored social service agencies and meet with local congressional offices. The trip so far was also full of adventures, they told the gathering at South Bend. They were overwhelmed by the goodness, hospitality and support they had received, they added.

At Good Shepherd Montessori School, Campbell opened the Indiana visit by telling several hundred people that sisters and Catholic institutions were doing wonderful work to meet the needs of people on the economic margins. Campbell mentioned two incidents from that morning, which they had spent in Milwaukee: The sisters visited Seton Dental Clinic, which provides free dental care, and St. Benedict the Moor Parish, where they attended a community meal served by "ordinary" Catholics, including many families.

"Even the little kids were passing out plastic forks and napkins," she said.

Campbell also talked of the nuns' visit to a low-income housing project in Chicago, Mercy Housing.

"It's remarkable what Chicago has been able to do," said Donoghue, who works to provide affordable housing in Los Angeles.

She said the public-private partnerships in developing and running programs for those on the margins are working remarkably well, but federal budget cuts proposed by Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) and passed by the House of Representatives will hurt people struggling to pay for housing.

In this election year, Campbell added, "we want people to tell their congressional representatives about the flaws in the Ryan budget. Ryan budget supporters want to cut SNAP (the food stamp program) and Medicaid for children and the disabled. These cuts will also decimate housing programs."

Pointing to the large NETWORK posters they'd brought, Campbell said proposed Ryan budget cuts will push 2 million children's families into poverty, kick 8 million off food stamps and drop 30 million from health care.

NETWORK and 65 other religious groups have created the [Faithful Budget](#) [2] with "comprehensive and compassionate budget principles" to propose instead, she said. Among other things, the budget proposes putting Americans back to work building roads, bridges and schools and ensuring that millionaires don't pay lower taxes than working families. The Faithful Budget promotes "reasonable revenue for responsible programs," Campbell said.

Holy Cross Sr. Michaeleen Frieders from nearby St. Mary's College and the Holy Cross motherhouse nodded her head. She came to listen to the sisters from the bus and said she couldn't agree more with their assessment that Americans have to become personally involved. Once the CEO of Mercy Health System, one of the largest health care corporations in the country, Frieders said she has seen the Catholic ministry at many levels.

Frieders left her position as CEO 20 years ago when she realized she really didn't know what it meant to "walk with the poor" in a personal way, she said. For 16 years, she and other sisters worked in southern Maryland, setting up free clinics, soup kitchens and centers for the poor. Now in her 80s, she works on a "one-to-one" basis with Hispanic single mothers on South Bend's west side. The needs are great and growing, she says.

Fellow Holy Cross Sr. Suzanne Patterson agreed that ministry has to mean walking with the poor.

"I see my role in ministry as an accompaniment," she said.

For 14 years, Patterson has been involved with the outreach of Broadway Christian Church, a small Methodist congregation on South Bend's southeast side. Broadway serves breakfast four days a week and a full, hot meal every Sunday after the last service. The church also offers shower and laundry facilities as well as a food pantry.

Like the Nuns on the Bus, Patterson said she believes ordinary Catholics can make a difference when they respond to the growing needs in their communities.

"The thing that keeps me hopeful is that people are still trying to help each other," she said, adding that she is amazed at the outreach of the small church, which continues to attract volunteers and serve hundreds of people every week. But the number of people needing help is growing all the time, she said.

On Friday morning, the Nuns on the Bus visited South Bend's Sr. Maura Brannick Clinic, and Campbell said she was amazed at what they found.

Now part of the St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, the clinic, which was founded in 1986 by Holy Cross Sr. Maura Brannick, serves a population in which almost 50 percent do not speak English. It's run by a full-time medical director and several other paid health care professionals but is largely staffed by volunteers, said Brannick, who is also a nurse. These 40 or so volunteers include nurses, physicians from every specialty, social workers, dentists and dental hygienists, Brannick said. Medications are distributed free from the clinic pharmacy. Even hip and knee replacement surgeries are done by clinic physicians for free.

"This is a story we have to tell our congressmen," Campbell said.

Minds and hearts won't be changed with data, she continued. "We need to break their hearts with the stories of what's happening."

[Catherine Odell is a freelance writer and editor who lives in South Bend, Ind.]

CORRECTION: In an earlier version of this story, the religious order of Sr. Mary Wendeln was misidentified. Wendln is a Precious Blood Sister from Dayton, Ohio.

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Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/30798>

[2] <http://www.faithfulbudget.org>