

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 10, 2012 at 3:58pm

What it's like to be a Nun on the Bus

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NCR Today

I spent last week with the Nuns on the Bus through 1,000 miles in Missouri. Strictly speaking, we were on a van, not a bus. And I was the only nun who rode for the whole trip. A Precious Blood brother, Daryl Charron, and a Loretto co-member, Alice Kitchen, and I were the constants. Each day, others joined us: sisters and other laymen and women, mostly Catholic.

We went to the offices of the six Republican members of Congress who voted for vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan's budget to explain to them how it hurts the poor. We also visited the office of the Republican candidate for the one open seat and the office of Sen. Roy Blunt.

You notice I say we visited the offices. Although they were all home, none of the members or the candidate chose to meet with us. Their staffs were welcoming and took extensive notes. We didn't visit the Democrats because they didn't vote for or support the Ryan budget.

We began on the Tuesday after Labor Day with a telephone seminar on communications by members of Faith and Public Life. They reminded us to stay on message: The Ryan budget is an immoral document and our authority for speaking is our work with the poor.

What would we answer, they asked, if the press questioned us on our position on marriage? We would say that poverty puts enormous stress on marriage and family life. We're here today to talk about poverty and the Ryan budget. It was a very helpful briefing, but neither the press nor office staff asked us challenging questions.

What made the trip exciting were the people who met us at every stop. There was always a little group when we pulled in, and more to come. The office rooms were small and, even after we'd begun the meeting, people edged in around the walls and stood in the doorways and down the halls.

At one office, we sat in the open reception area with 22 people in a circle. I introduced the group and everyone followed, on point, describing their work at St. Vincent de Paul, at food pantries, elderly home care, with the mentally ill, in hospice, with Bread for the World.

One man reminded us that the U.S. ranks 32nd in the world in infant mortality. Another man said the nursing home that cares for his 100-year-old mother would have to put out 80 percent of their patients if Medicaid is cut.

A woman I've known for many years told a story I had never heard before. When she was a young mother, she was leafleting at a center that provided abortions. An older woman came up to her, took a leaflet and stood, wanting to talk. She said during the Depression, she was living with her husband's family and got pregnant. Her mother-in-law insisted she get an abortion because the family had no money for food. My friend said she learned two things: that women don't forget the suffering of an abortion and that poverty causes abortions.

I was humbled by the passion these men and women bring to their work for the poor, and I was filled with hope by their commitment to do good. When the meetings were over, we all went out to the van and took photos by the magnetic Nuns on the Bus sign -- even some of the staffers wanted to be in the pictures.

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