

Lobbying nuns take to the road

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—Catherine Odell

Above: Presentation Sr. Mary Wendeln; Sr. Marge Clark, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell in South Bend, Ind.

Right: Marianne Todey listens to Campbell speak during a stop on the first day of the Nuns on the Bus tour June 18 in Ames, Iowa.



—AP/Charlie Neibergall

AMES, IOWA; SOUTH BEND, IND.; AND COLUMBUS, OHIO - As a Catholic, Congressman Steve King, R-Iowa, should have known better than to disappoint a nun, especially a group of them who had come clean across the United States just to see him.

But that is exactly what he did in mid-June, leaving a small typed note taped on the door of his newly opened Ames office that said he was meeting with voters on the other side of Iowa's 4th Congressional District.

Yet despite the blustery early morning, unusually hot even for Iowa, there stood the faithful: Iowa voters of every age, as well as Catholics, non-Catholics, fallen-away Catholics and those with no religion at all, ready to welcome four sisters from NETWORK, a 40-year-old Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington, D.C.

Hundreds of supporters stood waiting for the arrival of "Nuns on the Bus," an eight-state traveling bus tour of Catholic sisters that started June 18 in Ames and, as of press time, was expected to end July 2 in Washington.

By that time, more than 15

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sisters from a variety of orders will have rotated on and off the tour bus over some 2,000 miles, getting to know people and trying to meet the voices of power in hopes of raising awareness among Americans of what the sisters say are the devastating effects of Congressman Paul Ryan's, R-Wis., proposed federal budget plan.

Nuns on the Bus hit the road with the goal of bringing as many signatures of ordinary Americans to the desks of congressional members of both parties for a presentation July 2. But King, a tea party darling who is a staunch supporter of fellow Catholic Ryan's budget plan, was nowhere to be found. Although his office promised a staffer to greet the sisters, none was there.

That didn't stop the sisters and their supporters. When the Rev. Joy Gonnerman of Kimballton, Iowa, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was asked why she drove to Ames to meet the Nuns on the Bus tour, her comments were glowing.

"It's a Jesus thing," she said. "I saw [Social Service] Sr. Simone [Campbell] and loved what she said. This is all about showing solidarity with the Gospel and speaking truth to power. This endless voice of law bothers me."

When the Nuns on the Bus tour rolled into South Bend, Ind., the evening of June 21, it found a similar enthusiasm — one normally reserved for University of Notre Dame teams coming home after big wins on the road.

At that time, Campbell, the main spokeswoman for the touring sisters and executive director of NETWORK, 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."

Yet, speaking at Good Shepherd Montessori School, Campbell opened the Indiana visit by focusing on the work Catholic institutions are doing to meet the needs of people on the economic margins.

She said the public-private partnerships in developing and running programs for those on the margins are working remarkably well, but the budget cuts proposed by Ryan 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.

Holy Cross Sr. Michaeleen Frieders from nearby St. Mary's College 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

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell speaks in Ames, Iowa.



—Sue Stanton

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.

Three hundred miles and four days later, Campbell was remarking on how, despite what sometimes seems to be the large chasm between conservative politicians and those concerned for people in poverty, there can still be some encouraging surprises.

Speaking to another crowd of hundreds in Columbus, Ohio, June 25, Campbell recounted a conversation that day with a legislative staffer in Republican Congressman Pat Tiberi's Columbus office. While the two started the meeting at odds, she said, the tone eventually shifted.

The meeting became, Campbell said,

"the first substantive conversation we have had on our visits. We both agreed that we need more revenues. I have a hunch we probably have a disagreement as to where, but at least we've got a starting point."

Ending her talk during the Columbus visit by referencing the story in Ezekiel of the valley of dry bones, Campbell said it's the task of Catholics to enflame God's word.

The U.S., she said, has become a field of dry bones: "We need to put flesh on those bones and remember that we are God's breath, the breath of Spirit, which can inspire us be able to talk to people who think differently than we do."

[Sue Stanton is a freelance writer based in Ames, Iowa. Catherine Odell is a freelance writer and editor who lives in South Bend, Ind. Sharon Abercrombie lives and writes from Columbus, Ohio. As the Nuns on the Bus tour stopped in their cities, all three filed individual reports, which can be found at NCRonline.org.]