

Executive Director's Report to the Week of Compassion's Board of Stewards

Spring 2024 Meeting

I recently returned from Eastern Europe on my first visit to see the work of our global partners' bilateral response to the Ukrainian crisis. The conflict is over two years old now, and millions of Ukrainian refugees have fled into the surrounding countries and have been settling since, but still with hope of returning home someday. Due to so much uncertainty surrounding when the war will end, the sentiment now from Ukrainians and local partners is to focus on refugee displacement possibly being permanent rather than preparing them to stay temporarily. This means focusing on the long-term development of rebuilding lives and better integration into society for children and the elderly.

The two countries I was able to visit were Hungary and Moldova. In Hungary we visited with the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid, Hungarian Interchurch Aid, and Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hungary; in Moldova, we visited with the Moldovian Church Aid, CWS, YMCA, and Homecare Associations. All of these partners and the Ukrainians we met expressed their deep gratitude for the church and the support we have been giving in the last two years. Much government funding, including from UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration, has significantly decreased as more needs are on the rise. Furthermore, most of these organizations were already working on non-Ukrainian refugees prior to the start of the conflict two years ago, serving many refugees from Afghanistan and the Middle East. That work in the last two years has had less focus due to the large influx of Ukrainians coming into these countries and the tremendous financial resources that were made available in the beginning from governments and various NGOs to serve Ukrainian refugees. But now, there is a movement to think more about a long-term, sustainable approach to the situation for Ukrainians and other refugees within society and less about the immediate emergency.

Week of Compassion has formed a partnership with the Presbyterian Church USA and Kerk in Actie (Protestant Church in the Netherlands In Action) to explore, for the next year, an overall long-term strategy to use our various financial resources to support the ongoing crisis in Eastern Europe. The hope for this strategy is to make sure we are coordinating our responses and bringing in new partners to provide critical support and a common path forward as the crisis deepens. In addition, many of the European church partners have spent a majority of their funding within the first two years, and they are now looking at other partners to help sustain some of the various programs for the foreseeable future.

While our humanitarian response surrounding Ukraine is important, many other crises continue to call our attention. As of today, there are over 114 million displaced people, and this number continues to grow. It's at an all-time high due to the war in Ukraine and conflicts with Israel-Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar; drought, floods, and insecurity in Somalia; as well as a prolonged humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan have been the main drivers of the alarming new total. Globally, far too many conflicts are proliferating or escalating, shattering innocent lives and uprooting people. Now it's as important as ever for

many countries, including the US, to continue to welcome refugees. I am grateful that many of our partners, such as CWS, are already coming up with various scenarios for welcoming refugees since the upcoming presidential election will have a major impact on how the US will fund and welcome refugees from all over the world. No matter the outcome of the election, Week of Compassion is committed to working with local churches, regions, and refugee resettlement agencies to find creative ways to engage with migrants. I am grateful for Rev. Alan Dicken, our Associate Director for Immigrant and Refugee Response, who continues to work with our churches and partners to strengthen our migration response and help our churches be ready to welcome people as the needs arise.

As of this writing, there are many natural disasters occurring all over the world—from flooding in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Brazil, and Texas to major heat waves in the Philippines, India, Thailand, and parts of Africa (70 countries or territories broke heat records in the first five days of May) to severe tornadoes across the US. As a whole, the US just had its second highest number of tornadoes for the month of April. Climate change is having an impact on our planet, and we will continue to see more and more of its effects. For Week of Compassion, how we engage, develop, and strengthen relationships with our partners, both domestically and globally, to strategize our response in a way that meets the current demand of disasters is a crucial key to being able to implement our mission. Recently, I have been asked to chair the ACT Alliance's Emergency Preparedness Response Plan, where we are engaging with ACT partners not only for emergency preparedness but also looking at various ways to mitigate potential disasters that impact the most vulnerable people. Domestically, Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold continues to engage with various partners and regions to strengthen our domestic response in the current time that we live in, especially taking into consideration our DEI work and serving the marginalized communities in times of disaster.

Internally, Week of Compassion continues to grow and change in our programs and our staff. Rev. Alexis Vaughan started as the Managing Director of Domestic Operations on January 1, 2024. In this first quarter, she has been examining Week of Compassion's internal processes and procedures to increase efficiency and collaboration among staff. After soliciting staff input on specific procedures that need improving, Rev. Vaughan revised Week of Compassion's existing travel request and booking process, had staff update their contingency plans, and created internal speaking points for discussing how Week of Compassion funding works with those outside the organization who ask.

To strengthen our operations and create greater collaboration among staff, Rev. Vaughan instituted the organization's use of Asana, a project management tool designed to help remote teams organize, track, and manage their individual portfolios and joint projects. Rev. Vaughan has led training sessions with staff on how to use Asana to maximize our collaboration, identify who is accountable for each element of a project, and help everyone meet deadlines. As staff become more comfortable using Asana, additional tools can be used to streamline our approval processes and collaborate with contractors and other contributors outside the organization.

In April, Rev. Vaughan worked diligently to hire an interim disaster and refugee support staff person. We welcomed Rev. Yvette Hernandez officially on April 22nd. Rev. Vaughan led her onboarding process and is working closely with her and Rev. Hamilton-Arnold to identify the positives and challenges of our current processes and procedures related to our volunteer opportunities.

Rev. Vaughan strives to be an advocate for staff and support the Executive Director as needed. She coordinated the in-person staff retreat in April 2024 to focus on team building amidst structural changes in the organization, improving our internal communications, and being intentional about meeting our DEI priorities and goals. Rev. Vaughan continues to meet weekly with each staff member to provide ongoing support to their work. As there has been much change internally within Week of Compassion, it has been clear that more time is needed for team building and ongoing training opportunities for staff. We are looking at trying to capture more opportunities for staff to meet in person and learn how each of us functions and works within a team. As the ministry continues to evolve and change for the current time that we are in, it's also important that we work closely with staff to shift the culture of the organization to meet the new structure of the ministry.