

## **Executive Director's Report to the Week of Compassion's Board of Stewards Spring 2023 Meeting**

Week of Compassion continues its focus on three programmatic priorities for this year: disasters on the margins, women's empowerment, and climate change. As of this writing, one of the many disasters that has bubbled up is the conflict in Sudan. The country is the third largest in Africa and borders seven surrounding countries that are also unstable and have civil conflict. Our primary partner in Sudan is ACT Alliance, and many NGOs have already evacuated their staff from the country for safety. This situation has the potential to have major consequences in the already unstable region, affecting some of the largest refugee camps in the world located in Sudan and the surrounding countries. Week of Compassion will continue to work with partners in Sudan and other areas that might be indirectly affected by this conflict.

The work of women's rights and empowerment, for the first time in decades, has gone backward. Due to the pandemic and conflicts in many places, women's rights have been taken away, placing women in more vulnerable situations, unable to protect and support their families and communities. Specifically, many of our partners have seen an increase in gender-based violence around the world. In December, the new Taliban government in Afghanistan ordered an end to girls' education beyond age 12, and declared that no Afghan women would work for any NGOs.. This has tremendous long-term effects on providing adequate health and care support for women since, in that culture, like many other cultures globally, only women doctors can support women. Within ACT Alliance, gender justice is integrated into all emergency appeals responses, ensuring the support of vulnerable girls and women.

Recently a pastor shared, "Week of Compassion doesn't get a break," after hearing about one disaster after another, ranging from tornadoes to floods across the country and around the world. Climate change continues to hurt vulnerable communities and has increased weather-related disasters, both in frequency and intensity. Week of Compassion staff continues to strengthen relationships with ecumenical partners and long-term recovery groups in order to respond to the many disasters taking place in the United States. There continue to be new relationships built across denominational lines with churches that Week of Compassion historically has never worked with before. The infrastructure and ecumenical landscape continue to shift on a regular basis, while resources decline with increasingly frequent disasters. Working together and creating new partnerships to address climate change and other disaster-related problems are as important now as ever before.

At the start of the new year, earthquakes took place in Syria and Turkey, causing major damage and taking many lives in a region that was already unstable due to an over-decade-long civil war in Syria. Many of the appeals for Syria have been revised to include the earthquake recovery response. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine continues to affect other programs, with funds being directed from other places to Ukraine, making many of the programs our partners support even more challenging.

Within our domestic disaster work, we continue to implement the DEI assessment and recommendations that were provided to Week of Compassion last year. In all of our domestic work, the staff has been looking through the lens of equity in every aspect—grant distributions, partnership support, working with vulnerable communities, building and expanding volunteers—as a way to strengthen our work and serve vulnerable communities. This is a priority for Week of Compassion and will take several years as we live into and figure out, adapt, and make changes to our domestic disaster work as we align with the recommendations.

Since the Director of Disciples Volunteering at Disciples Home Missions came vacant a few years ago, there has been confusion within local churches as to who is coordinating volunteer opportunities for the wider church. Week of Compassion has been, to a limited degree, coordinating volunteers for disaster response, especially for mission sites in a few cities for home repair and rebuilding. In stepping back and living in this void for the last couple of years, we also realized that the way in which volunteer opportunities have been done within the church, and specifically within Week of Compassion, has not been sustainable or impactful. The current volunteer pool within Week of Compassion is small, and the same group of people can only do this for another few years. Week of Compassion wants to address this situation and, instead of focusing on one particular component of volunteers within a disaster, we imagine something bigger that can have a major impact when Disciples engage with the work and mission of Week of Compassion through our volunteer program. This is something that Week of Compassion staff Raiza Spratt has been strategizing for the last year, and we continue to explore and see how Week of Compassion will strengthen volunteer engagement in our mission work. You will hear more about this during our board meeting.

The work of refugees and immigration within Week of Compassion - while not new, as it has always been a part of our mission and we have supported partners to do this important work - continues to be a journey of exploration to figure out what Week of Compassion can do and will do. Our Refugee and Immigrant Response staff member, Alan Dicken, continues to engage with local churches and refugee resettlement in helping these local churches do refugee work. We are still at the beginning in trying to figure out how to best serve the church and the refugee and migrant communities in a world that changes daily due to government laws and other factors that come up from time to time. In the meantime, Week of Compassion has been figuring out how to best support Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries in their border work; strengthening our relationship with Disciples Home Missions' Disciples Immigration Legal Counsel by regularly sharing work and issues that arise within Disciples churches; and forming pilot programs in key locations with local and regional churches to work with migrants.

Financially, Disciples churches continue to be generous in supporting the mission of Week of Compassion. Our unrestricted revenues continue to increase each year, enabling us to focus on vulnerable communities that do not make it on the news. We are grateful that this trend continues to go up because many of our ecumenical partners have expressed how their unrestricted revenues are declining every year. The return of our endowment plays a crucial role in our unrestricted giving and continues to increase annually; and at the end of 2022, the return from the Christian Church Foundation was the highest return for Week of Compassion.

The return has almost doubled from 10 years ago and is continuing to not only fully fund all administrative costs, but also support other various partner programs with the surplus. Moving forward, Week of Compassion is being mindful of how we speak about our administrative costs so as not to hurt partners who are without endowments or other sources of funding to cover their administrative costs; leaving them to work harder at keeping administrative costs at a minimum. There is always an administrative cost in every ministry and institution. It's easy for Week of Compassion to say that all administrative costs are covered by the endowment, but we can never say that the administrative cost is zero. We get the question about our administrative percentage frequently, and this has increased more recently because of the expanded staff within Week of Compassion. We are grateful for this question coming up regularly because it tells us our donors care about this ministry and want to make sure we are using the resources prudently and effectively.

As Week of Compassion continues to grow and change to meet the current needs of the world, next year marks our 80th anniversary. In the beginning, Disciples started to take up an offering 80 years ago to respond to the needs of disasters at the time. Disciples continue to come together and offer their prayers and support to the world through Week of Compassion. While we were just an offering back then, our institution today has been built on strong foundations and has created and strengthened many partnerships in domestic and global humanitarian work. As we plan for this celebration, we give thanks for the many people who have been a part of this ministry, the various ways churches now fundraise for Week of Compassion, and the many partner connections and collegial relationships that Week of Compassion has built, which strengthen our ecumenical disaster response. This ministry encompasses so many people along the way, and the impact remains.