



[Week of Compassion](#) is the relief, refugee, and development mission fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

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July 8, 2024

Disciples work for health & healing worldwide

Week of Compassion and World Council of Churches create new opportunity to serve

Health and reproductive rights for women around the world remain as important as ever, and supporting individual access to complete and informed care, especially for women and young girls, is one way to lift families out of extreme poverty. Global research has repeatedly shown that when women in societies thrive, entire communities will be more prosperous, cohesive, healthier, and safer.

The World Council of Churches, following its last Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany (September 2022), reiterated a priority of *gender justice and reproductive health* for women and girls worldwide. Alongside global ecumenical partners, and through the Week of Compassion Women's Empowerment Fund – from Pakistan to South Sudan, from the Roma people of Serbia to Palestinian refugees in the Ramallah/Jalazoune Refugee Camp, and in countless other places and ways – **Week of Compassion has worked for decades to strengthen and fortify the lives of women and girls in otherwise vulnerable communities and situations.**

In many regions around the world where Week of Compassion partners engage, women lack access to quality healthcare due to cultural and religious barriers. Faith communities – equipped with programs, projects, and resources designed with their context and health in mind – play a vital role in bridging the gap between education and cultural norms, enabling women and girls increased autonomy over their bodies and reproductive choices. This makes the ongoing support and engagement of Week of Compassion and countless ecumenical partners absolutely essential.

In 2023, with support from Week of Compassion, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the [World Council of Churches](#) (WCC) agreed to a new partnership, the secondment of a full-time staff member supporting the World Council's [Health and Healing Program](#). (A *secondment* is an agreement where an employee of one organization connects with another organization, to increase its pool of workers, experience, and skills.) This new staff role, the **Project Officer on Human Dignity and Reproductive Health** at the World Council of Churches, is a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Office of the General Minister and President, working full-time with the World Council of Churches staff in Geneva and with churches all over the world. On behalf of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Rev. Alexa Dava, a member of Gilead Church Chicago, began this three-year appointment in September 2023.

Rev. Dava works with member communions of the World Council of Churches to reclaim and uplift human dignity in the context of reproductive health. Describing her ministry as “part advocacy and part education,” Rev. Dava works with local member churches around the world to support, promote, and advocate for better access to facilities and services that focus on reproductive health

and women's health care, helping all to live well and fully thrive. Her extensive research toward publications and new resources on reproductive health issues will put a theological framework to these needs. The project will help churches, using the language of faith, to be better aware, educated and equipped to engage the concerns of women's reproductive health and care.



Rev. Alexa Dava



The Working Group for HIV and Reproductive Health as part of the Commission on Health and Healing meetings in March 2024 at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva

In many places where Week of Compassion partners are active, **the issue of women's access to healthcare and reproductive rights is about more than direct physical access**, or even women's understanding of their health needs and concerns; it also involves changing the cultural understanding among men about the benefits of women having control over their own health. Communities of color and economically underdeveloped nations are especially impacted by maternal and infant mortality, unintended pregnancy, and obstetric fistula. Often, cultural norms prevent women from seeing doctors or using contraception, and men play a significant role in enforcing these barriers.

In areas of Pakistan, for example, access to basic healthcare is already seen as a privilege. In conditions like these, managing simple menstrual hygiene has become a daunting task for many young girls and women, compounded by a lack of awareness on hygiene practices and persistent financial constraints making basic supplies hard to come by. Week of Compassion ecumenical partners work in such communities, offering education and care sessions on menstrual hygiene and reproductive health, and providing 'dignity kits', which include washable reusable menstrual pads, clean underwear, detergent and bath soap, and other personal hygiene basics.



Chapel altar, Church Center at United Nations, New York City

Access to simple education and basic supplies not only addresses the immediate hygiene needs of



UNAIDS Office in Geneva with the Working Group on HIV and Reproductive Health

girls and keeps them healthier; it also increases self-confidence and allows for uninterrupted school attendance. Overcoming cultural barriers allows women to have the necessary access to proper healthcare.

Rev. Dava approaches this work with a close eye on the creation story as told in Genesis 1:

“You have this world of chaos ... God is creating and pulling it together into one ecosystem, and creates humans as part of that. ... In a story where the emphasis is on a safe and sustainable environment, what does it mean to reproduce, and to create a safe and sustainable environment for that to happen?”



the remote WCC staff members

Having these conversations in faith communities can be complicated, and Rev. Dava says the thing that excites her most about this work is the fact that this new role even exists:

“When I talk about this job ... I have feet in communities of progressive Christians, feet in conservative Christian communities, and when I can talk about the fact that churches have rarely prioritized honoring women’s bodies and treating women’s bodies with dignity ... I think there’s a whole community of Christians who are craving spiritual language to talk about gender justice, to talk specifically about reproductive health. It makes me really excited to share this good news in that way. Churches have a really rich toolkit of ritual and liturgy and language, and it makes me excited to access that toolkit via these gender justice issues.”



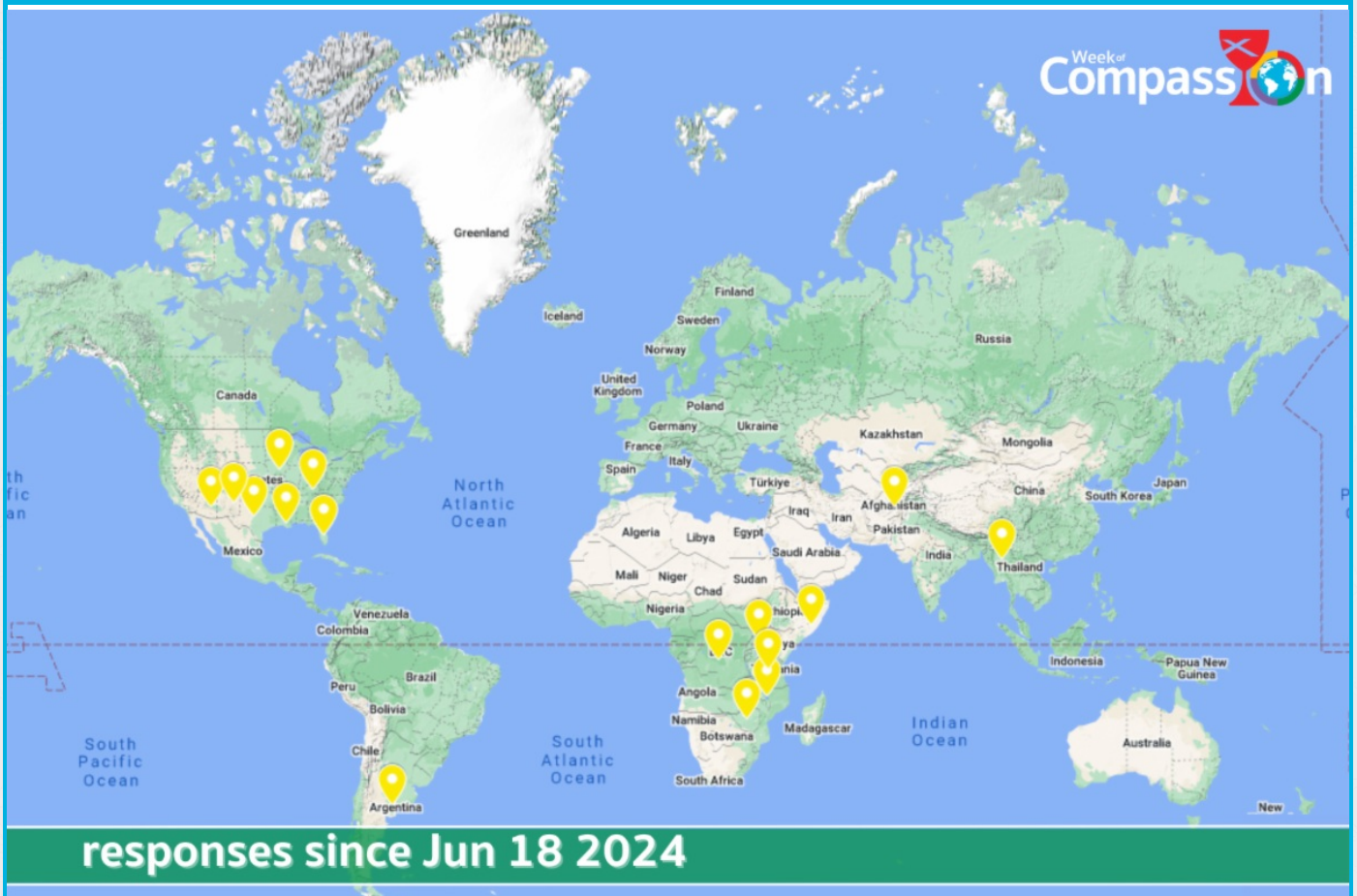
It is the heart of the gospel message to approach every person with compassion, dignity, and mercy. As Rev. Dava notes:

*“Jesus in the gospels is interacting with women, treating them with dignity and respect, treating them as his disciples, as capable of moral discernment, capable of learning and studying and making choices about how to live well, how to live according to Christ’s teachings. **Just as much as churches are an inroad to this topic, they can also be a barrier. Churches have the choice: to figure out where they want to stand.**”*

Week of Compassion is grateful for the faithful partnerships, creative collaborations, and ongoing work with partners to alleviate suffering around the world, toward a world where God's people transform suffering into hope.

All photos courtesy Rev. Alexa Dava.

For more about the project for reproductive health and gender justice at the World Council of Churches, find the full unedited [conversation with Rev. Alexa Dava](#).



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MISSION : to work with partners to alleviate suffering throughout the world

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