

WEEK OF COMPASSION COMMITTEE

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OVERVIEW:

2008 was a year of increasing economic distress and the emergence of the global food crisis. It was also another record-breaking year for natural disasters. Human-created disasters such as the protracted, violent conflicts in Iraq, the Middle East, the Darfur region of Sudan and in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo remained among the most horrific humanitarian crises of the year. Disciples continued to support and trust the historic efficiency and effectiveness of Week of Compassion, the relief, refugee and development ministry fund. Responding to some form of human need every single day, Week of Compassion offers a reliable and faithful mechanism for Disciples to participate in helping to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression. Despite the financial struggles many faced, the 2008 Week of Compassion offering was up by slightly more than one percent, for which we are deeply appreciative.

Poverty, hunger, lack of clean water, disease, illiteracy, unemployment, displacement and other inequities remained as pervasive as ever, and Week of Compassion's support of long-term sustainable development projects remained an important part of WoC's witness and work in the world. Grants totaling over \$550,000 were made to projects in 45 countries and to ten states in the USA. These included 41 food production/security projects in 28 countries through our partnership with the Foods Resource Bank and Church World Service, with WoC/Disciples serving as lead funder for projects in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through Seed Programs, Inc. WoC/Disciples provided seeds to thousands of families and hundreds of communities throughout Africa, with a major investment in Zimbabwe and Liberia. In conjunction with Global Ministries' Area Offices, WoC funded sustainable development projects in Angola, Philippines, Turkey, Haiti, China, Micronesia, Ecuador and Syria, to name a few. WoC's sustainable development work encompasses food security, income generation, health care, water, sanitation, education, vocational training, women's empowerment, peacebuilding, trauma counseling and psycho-social care.

WoC continues to make long-term rehabilitation (post-disaster) work a priority, and the strong support WoC received in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season is still enabling us to continue such critical ministry along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast through the second phase of the Disciples Hurricane Recovery Initiative.

In 2008, undesignated giving to Week of Compassion remained strong at \$2,461,362. Designated giving reached \$715,826, an increase of one percent over 2007 designated giving. Income from WoC's endowment program and other funds in the Christian Church Foundation equaled \$139,888, down from \$151,041 in 2007 because of the impact the economic crisis had on the Christian Church Foundation. Of special note in 2008 was the dramatic increase in on-line giving to Week of Compassion, totaling \$76,649, up from \$30,156 in 2007, a 154% increase.

2008 was also a season of great transition for WoC. After 16 years of dedicated service, Johnny Wray resigned as Director. An executive search process resulted in the calling of Amy Gopp as the new Executive Director. Her work commenced, officially, on December 1, 2008. WoC is profoundly grateful for the faithful and effective ministry of Johnny Wray and for the extraordinary leadership he provided WoC for so many years.

1. Knowing that the current priorities are to start new congregations, transform existing congregations for mission, nurture leadership for these new and renewed congregations, and become a reconciling church, what is the role of your ministry in fulfilling these priorities?

In April 2008, Week of Compassion organized the first "WeekEnd of Compassion" event in Nashville, Tennessee, with the objective to make the work of Week of Compassion more visible to Disciples congregations; recognize and strengthen lay leadership for mission/outreach in Disciples churches; introduce participants to WoC's ecumenical partner organizations; provide a forum for exchanging ideas and empowering each other; and revitalize our commitment to God's mission in the world. WeekEnd offered a full schedule for 150 people (capacity) from 24 different states and 70 Disciples congregations. The event began Friday evening with dinner and ended with lunch on Sunday afternoon (a pre-event WoC/Habitat for Humanity Build was also part of the event on Friday morning).

In addition, WeekEnd of Compassion was an opportunity for leaders representing already-established congregations to recommit themselves and their congregations to mission and outreach, establishing a new vitality as congregations get more deeply involved with Week of Compassion and invariably find new life. WeekEnd also hosted over 20 seminarians to provide support and encouragement in their discernment.

Another strong component of WeekEnd was the creative and vibrant worship experience each day, which focused on themes of compassion, justice and transformation. Workshops led by our ecumenical partner organizations served as the critical educational piece of WeekEnd, each one of them offering practical tools for application in the life of a congregation. Week of Compassion staff received written affirmations from most of the participants regarding their own personal transformations. Personal transformation leads to action and transformation among the communities of which the WeekEnd participants are a part. Along with the networking and relationship-building that happened at WeekEnd of Compassion, this transformation contributed to the work that will establish, reestablish, renew and transform local congregations.

Week of Compassion also entered into a new and vital partnership with Equal Exchange in 2008. In conjunction with Disciples Home Missions, WoC began promoting the use of fair trade coffee and other products (tea, chocolate, nuts and fruits) from Equal Exchange through the establishment of the "Disciples Coffee Project." For every pound of coffee Disciples of Christ purchase from Equal Exchange, 15 cents comes back to the "Disciples Food Security and Hunger Relief Fund," which is then divided at year-end between WoC and DHM. In 2008, WoC received \$991.20 for this fund, which in turn allows WoC to support even more sustainable development and agricultural assistance projects in coffee-producing countries. Disciples purchased 6,608 pounds of fairly traded products in 2008, up from 3,420 in 2007. Week of Compassion is proud to be able to support more small stakeholder farmers in the developing world as a result of this new partnership with Equal Exchange.

Because of the significant resources given to Week of Compassion in response to the 2005 hurricane season, WoC has been able to continue its support of revitalization efforts to two congregations in the Great River Region - First Christian Church, Slidell, LA, and Westside Christian Church, New Orleans, LA -congregations whose ministries and facilities were seriously impacted by Katrina but to whom new opportunities of service and growth have been given. In 2008 WoC continued to provide major support of the Disciples Hurricane Recovery Initiative. That support included assistance to Disciples Mission Stations at First CC, Gulfport, MS; Grace Disciples Church, Covington, LA; First CC, Slidell, LA; Westside CC, New Orleans, LA; First CC, Metairie, LA; First CC, Lake Charles, LA; First CC, Port Arthur, TX; Northwood CC, Beaumont, TX; and Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries, Los Fresnos, TX – support that is providing numerous opportunities for ministry and witness within those communities and also the congregations sending work teams to them. WoC also supported the establishment of a new mission station at First Christian Church in Texas City, Texas, as a result of the devastation of Hurricane Ike. More than 960 work groups (with more than 8500 volunteers) have participated, or are currently scheduled to participate, in the Hurricane Recovery Initiative, which translates to 340,080 hours donated! WoC and the Office of Disciples Volunteering continued a mission station with First CC, Pratt, KS and FCC, Kinsley, KS, to support long-term recovery efforts in tornado-ravaged Greensburg, KS. A brand new mission station was established at FCC in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to respond to the summer floods of 2008. Transformative stories abound of new energy and new life for individuals and congregations participating and for those they served.

Just as work groups are a great tool for leadership building, Week of Compassion also supports other programs that nurture leadership for the church. In partnership with the Office of Disciples Volunteering/Disciples Home Missions, WoC supports the Summer Mission Intern program, and with Global Ministries/Division of Overseas Ministries, WoC funds the Global Mission Intern program – both programs that give Disciples young people individual opportunities for service. Again in 2008, WoC sponsored a mission/study trip for Disciples seminary students to the Balkans as it had the five previous years, with the purpose of giving emerging Disciples leaders the opportunity to see WoC dollars and partnership at work on the ground in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2008, three seminary students also served as special interns with Week of Compassion and thus, had unique leadership development opportunities along with hands-on training in the ministries of relief and development. WoC considers it a priority to build relationships with Disciples youth, young adults and seminary students, and as part of that priority, Amy Gopp participated in and/or led numerous young leader conferences, retreats and related events.

Week of Compassion continues to support several ecumenical efforts in the Gulf South working to address issues of race, class and poverty that have been further exposed in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, such as the Harry Thompson Center in downtown New Orleans. On occasion, WoC provides grants to partners, including congregations, as they seek to address similar issues in their community.

2. In what ways are you partnering with other expressions of the Church and with other general ministries?

Partnerships are the core of Week of Compassion. Everything WoC does is done in and through a remarkable network of partnerships. Much of that work is done through our ecumenical partners, and WoC is repeatedly recognized as enabling Disciples to be important participants in partner organizations like Church World Service, Action by Churches Together, Foods Resource Bank, IMAWorld Health, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity, Souper Bowl of Caring, One Great Hour of Sharing and other church partners. Within the Disciples structures, WoC undergirds Refugee and Immigration Ministries and the Office of Disciples Volunteering in Disciples Home Missions and the Disciples Hurricane Recovery Initiative mentioned above. Also mentioned earlier, WoC supports the Global Mission Intern program and the Critical Presence Initiative in Global Ministries/Division of Overseas Ministries, as well as providing significant disaster and development grants through GM's Area Offices and overseas church partners. The Council on Christian Unity is a very valuable partner with whom we converse regularly around issues of ecumenicity, cooperative humanitarian ministries and the like, as well as working with CCU to support such programs as Bossey Scholarships for emerging church leaders from the developing world at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. The Christian Church Foundation has been a great partner in managing, promoting and building the WoC endowment program, as has Church Extension in providing stewardship of WoC dollars between the time they are received and the time they go out into the world to bring help and hope to hurting people. Certainly our partnerships with regions are important as we work with numerous regional and area offices each year to respond to Disciples affected by disasters, support regional work trips and participate in regional and area events.

Of special note in 2008 was the commencement of "CURAJ" (Compassion, Unity, Reconciliation and Justice), a new table of partnership convening the ministries of Week of Compassion, Council on Christian Unity, Reconciliation Ministry and the Office of General Minister and President. CURAJ is an exploration of how we might re-energize our passion as Disciples to our common witness and mission of compassion, justice, reconciliation and unity.

3. How have you been involved in congregations to fulfill their mission and ministry?

There is no partnership more important for Week of Compassion than the partnership we share with the nearly 2500 congregations that make the work and witness of WoC possible. That partnership involves, of course, far more than a financial relationship. In 2008, WoC supported approximately 150 congregations in work/mission trips; relied upon 75 congregations to respond to relief and humanitarian needs within their memberships and communities; and encouraged nearly 500 Disciples youth groups in their participation in the Souper Bowl of Caring. WoC also partnered with more than 22 congregations to combat hunger in the world with Foods Resource Bank local growing projects. For each congregation leading a growing project, WoC provided a \$1000 solidarity grant. For the \$22,000 WoC invested in these Disciples growing projects, harvest proceeds totaled more than \$240,000. There were also many Disciples churches engaged in the "Tents of Hope" campaign for Darfur, Sudan. Five of those churches were present in November in Washington, DC, for the culmination of the campaign – creating a "tent city" of the tents local churches had raised in solidarity with those in Darfur. In partnership with the Christian Church Foundation, WoC is also helping those congregations whose visible presence has closed but whose ministry continues through permanent funds that support WoC in perpetuity. Numerous existing congregations have also chosen to undergird their commitment to Disciples' humanitarian work in the world by establishing similar funds in the Foundation. These are just a few expressions of the ways in which WoC helps congregations fulfill the mission Christ has given to them to respond to those Christ called "the least of these, my brothers and sisters."

When Christ spoke of finding one's life through giving it away, he surely was speaking to communities of faith as well as people of faith. WoC becomes one of the ways, not the only way certainly, but a very crucial and important way, for Disciples congregations to engage in compassionate, self-emptying, life-giving, transforming ministry around the world, around the year. Week of Compassion continues to lift up joyous and humble thanks to God, Disciples congregations, members and friends for their steadfast trust and support, without which none of this ministry could be accomplished.