

Nuns on the Bus kicks off nationwide tour in Iowa

Sue Stanton | Jun. 18, 2012



Sr. Simone Campbell speaks in Ames, Iowa. (Sue Stanton)

AMES, Iowa -- Republican and Catholic Congressman Steve King of Iowa should have known better than to disappoint a nun, especially a group of them who have come clean across the United States just to see him.

But that is exactly what he did Monday, leaving a small typed note taped on the door of his newly opened Ames office that said he was meeting with voters across his newly redrawn Iowa 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 national movement of people challenged by the Gospel to act for justice, especially the teachings of Catholic social justice.

Hundreds of supporters stood waiting for Nuns on the Bus to arrive at the congressman's headquarters, the opening spot in their multistate bus tour that ends July 2 in Washington, D.C. At that time, more than 15 nuns

from a variety of orders will have rotated off and on the tour bus 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 Congressman Paul Ryan's (R-Wis.) budget plan would have if passed.

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] Sister Simone [Cambell] 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."

The Rev. Donna Ewert, a United Church of Christ pastor from Harlan, Iowa, expressed her strong feelings of solidarity with the nuns.

"I came here to stand up for justice and helping the poor," she said. "They are the ones getting the raw end of the deal and falling through the gaps. And the churches are supposed to fill the gaps? They are depleted, too."

Fr. Michael Amadeo of Holy Trinity Parish in Des Moines hosted the four sisters the night before with a gathering of prayerful support for the first day of their bus tour.

"Sister Simone spoke to a group of at least 300 people," he said at the rally. "We had a service of prayer and song, and we heard Sister Simone speak of the devastating consequences of the Ryan budget plan on the poor. She had a statement from the organization Bread for the World in which it was measured that if the Ryan budget is allowed to go through, every church, house of worship, synagogue and mosque across the nation will be required to add another \$50,000 in their budgets to make up for the plunge in food stamp support."

As the sisters' bus arrived in front of a newly opened Salvation Army store, they were greeted by signs of support, hundreds of well-wishers and local and national press. Campbell, Social Service Sr. Diane Donoghue, St. Francis Sr. Marge Clark and Mercy Sr. Mary Wheldon were greeted by Alec Johnson, head of the local Take Down Steve King campaign, which is funded by the CREDO super PAC.

After Campbell's talk on how the Ryan budget would impact Iowans if implemented, Jodie O'Donnell, an Iowan asked by the Take Down Steve King campaign to speak in support of the sisters' agenda, talked briefly of solidarity for the poor.

"I once was a Catholic but gave it up," she said. "However, I have never given up the Catholic social justice teachings it promotes, and I feel honored to be here with Sr. Simone. ... America is not in decline from the people at the bottom who game the system, but from those at the top who do."

When the nuns climbed back onto the bus, preparing to move to their next stop of their tour across the heartland of the United States, more than a few Catholics at the rally shared their support for the nuns.

Ken Recker, a parishioner at St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Ames, said he was delighted to see the nuns bring a voice of reason to such a divisive political landscape. One of the reasons he came was to be supportive to them in light of his faith tradition, he said.

"I was taught by the nuns," he said. "I'm still Catholic because of them."

And when asked why Sr. Jeanie Hagedorn, a sister of Humility of Mary who lives in Des Moines, braved the heat to come to the rally, she said: "All women religious live in community with one another. All of us are committed to peace and justice, and we believe that NETWORK is a voice for all of us in that effort."

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