



NETWORK CONNECTION

FOURTH QUARTER 2023

Inside This Issue

NETWORK New York Advocates
Commit to Issues and People

The Call to Invest in Welcoming Communities



The Work of **TRANSFORMATION**

Grounded in Gospel values and the Catholic social justice tradition, NETWORK transforms our society by shaping federal policies that achieve racial, economic, and social justice; serve the common good; and honor the dignity of all.

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Catherine Gillette of NETWORK Grassroots Mobilization, Vincent Stroud, Sr. Phyllis Tierney, SSJ, Jane Sutter Brandt, Sr. Beth LeValley, SSJ, and Ramona Moore gather for a reparations vigil in Rochester, N.Y., in August of 2022. See story on Page 5.

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Participants in Transformation

Renewing Democracy is a Truly Sacred Process



Mary J. Novak is
NETWORK's
Executive Director.

We are about a year away from the 2024 election, a critical moment for our country. We will either choose candidates who uphold and protect our democratic processes, or ones who degrade and subvert them.

Whether we realize it or not, we are constantly making choices about democracy. Every day, voting rights are put up for negotiation, Congressional maps are drawn and redrawn, our leaders are offered millions of dollars from corporate lobbies — and people like you and me engage in the work of advocacy for the common good. Democracy is a way of living that we must practice continually to keep common good goals in play.

While some see “politics” as a dirty word, Pope Francis teaches that we need politics. Specifically, we need politics centered on human dignity and the common good. For that centering to happen, our politics and policies must spring from below — being not just for those on the margins, but with and of the margins. The Catholic tradition teaches that when our politics are grounded in inclusive participation, love, and encounter with communities who are suffering, politics can become a sacred vocation — and, in Francis’ words, “one of the highest forms of charity.”

The importance of elections in transforming our politics cannot be overstated. But our politics also requires a kind of transformation that no single election can bring about. This is because a just democracy does not only mean free elections and functional governance. It also means a culture, politics, and society of participation.

Participation is one of the central principles of Catholic Social Teaching. The U.S. bishops, in their resources on Catholic Social Teaching, write, “We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

What could it mean to transform our politics, to create a system animated by participation, solidarity, and interdependence? What policies do we need?

For starters, we can ditch the heinous lie that only the “productive” or “prosperous” deserve what they need to get by (this is the false logic of Reagan-style capitalism). We can enact legislation that strengthens communities with access to health care, housing, jobs, and food. We can halt the ongoing legacy of disenfranchisement by strengthening the rights of Black and Brown communities. We can elect candidates who, in both word and deed, respect and bolster democratic processes. We can stop

allowing corporations and lobbies representing the interests of the wealthy few to dominate our politics — especially when those interests involve grave harms like fracking and weapons proliferation.

A participatory political system is not just one in which everyone gets a vote — although that is critical, and not even where our system is now. Rather, it is one in which communities are able to work together, in a spirit of liberation and mutual care, to solve problems and ensure that everyone has what they need to thrive. There is absolutely no room for any kind of oppression, stratification, or exploitation. A participatory political system is predicated on solidarity: the understanding that we are all interconnected, and that true flourishing is never at the expense or exclusion of another.

At the core, our political consciousness needs a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness. This is what Pope Francis has been calling for, especially in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.” It is this emphasis on interconnectedness, among and with both people and the rest of the natural world, that has prompted NETWORK to join in the crucial work of climate justice.

Ultimately, we are called to see that we are all intrinsically linked, which means your liberation is inseparable from mine. We are called to processes of inclusive, justice-driven, and collective decision-making. Many communities of women religious in the U.S. and around the world — communities I enjoy visiting and working with directly as part of my role at NETWORK — already model this vision of transformed politics, in the way they live into consensus-based, community discernment that follows the Spirit and is enlivened with care.

This season, we are moving through the annual dying back that is autumn, which will soon turn to the surprising hope breaking through at Christmas. In our politics, may we similarly move through a “dying back” of exclusion and domination, and emerge with hope and new possibilities for a society of participation, solidarity, and transformation.

Reclaiming the reality of our interconnectedness will unlock greater potential to transform our society. Instead of trickle-down, let transformation and renewal flow from living our sacred vocation of politics for the common good. 

Notable Quotables

What justice-seekers have been saying this quarter

“Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.”

– Ta-Nehisi Coates, Aug. 26, quoted at HR. 40 White House Action

“Seeking asylum is not a crime; it’s a human right and part of United States law.”

– Ben Stiller in an Aug. 3 UNHCR asylum video

“Current threats to voting and to the accountability of the rule of law will most assuredly destroy this country as we know it if the Voting Rights Act is not celebrated, upheld, and improved for each generation.”

– Joan F. Neal, NETWORK Deputy Executive Director and Chief Equity Officer on the 58th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act

“This is just one of those tests that as a democracy, we have to go through. I’m convinced that a jury of his peers looking at the evidence will make a decision, and that decision over the long term will make us stronger as a nation.”

– Rep. Bennie Thompson, on NPR Aug. 4, responding to the indictment of Donald Trump for election obstruction

“The challenge is that those of us that have nothing to lose—but our very souls—have to speak truth to power.”

– Sr. Anita Baird, DHM, at an Aug. 28 panel discussion on the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington at the Georgetown Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life

“I am writing a second part to *Laudato Si* to update it on current problems.”

– Pope Francis, Aug. 21, on the need to further speak to the moral urgency of care for the environment

“The toxic blend of ethno-religious identity politics [White Christian Nationalism] was reflected in the prayers and religious symbols participants carried at the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021.”

– Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute in an Aug. 31 article in *TIME*

“We should remind our politicians that America became the strongest nation on earth, not in spite of immigrants, but because of immigrants.”

– Rep. Joaquin Castro at NETWORK’s Sept. 13 Invest in Welcoming Communities event

“By honoring the principles of solidarity, fairness, and human dignity, we can work towards creating more just and inclusive workplaces for generations to come.”

– Min. Christian Watkins, NETWORK Government Relations Advocate, in a Labor Day reflection

“I invite everyone to reflect on how we as a community can work to make this country a better union by celebrating our diversity.”

– Ronnate Asirwatham, NETWORK Government Relations Director, July 4

Working For

TRANSFORMATION

New York Advocates Show the Power of Commitment to Issues, People, and Communities

BY MARK PATTISON



Justice-seekers from New York and NETWORK staff participate in a Zoom meeting with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York in 2021.



Janet and Lou Tullo, along with Bill Hurley, present a 2022 NETWORK Voting Record certificate to Rep. Pat Ryan (N.Y.-18). The Congressman received a 100 percent rating from NETWORK for his votes in the second session of the 117th Congress.



Jim Buckley and Joseph Molinatti join NETWORK Advocates Carol DeAngelo and Lois Harr in presenting a 2022 NETWORK Voting Record certificate to Rep. Ritchie Torres (N.Y.-15).

Getting involved in the work of justice-seeking takes many forms. For Anne Kiefer of Penn Yan, N.Y., it was as simple as receiving an email.

“There was an invitation: If you would like to become more active, come to a New York NETWORK Advocates Team meeting,” she recalls. “If you have an inclination to do advocacy for social justice issues,” Kiefer says, “NETWORK makes it easy. I can’t say enough for the support you get.”



Anne Kiefer

She’s had letters to the editor published in her local *Finger Lakes Times* newspaper and in the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* on preserving the expanded Child Tax Credit. With issues-based advocacy, Kiefer notes, “it’s really great to turn aside from the partisan part of it, which has gotten toxic in the last few years.”

NETWORK, with its long and vibrant history of over 50 years of educating, organizing, and lobbying on federal policy affecting the common good, has in recent years built Advocates Teams in strategic states across the U.S. With Catholics coming together with people of other faith traditions as well as secular

(continued on page 6)

justice-seekers, these teams exemplify the power of organizing and advocating for the common good. And the New York NETWORK Advocates Team, after just a couple of years, has shown what members dedicated to the issues of NETWORK's policy agenda can do to serve people impacted by these issues, to each other, and to their communities.

Building Relationships

Catherine Gillette, NETWORK's senior grassroots mobilization organizer, convened the New York team in mid-2021. With her from the start was Jane Sutter Brandt, a communications professional who now serves as team lead. The group meets monthly on Zoom, with Gillette providing policy updates and opportunities for advocacy as the team's liaison to NETWORK.

"Jane's leadership has been invaluable," notes Gillette.



Jane Sutter Brandt speaks at an August 2022 reparations vigil in Rochester, N.Y., one of four reparations-themed events sponsored by NETWORK's New York Advocates Team.

Sutter Brandt says of Gillette, "She sends out the links to the NETWORK policy position on its website," plus messaging to New York's congressional representatives. "They make it so easy for us to be advocates, and to encourage family and friends to be advocates."

"I know it's in line with where I want to go as a Catholic."

WILLIAM HURLEY

NETWORK first came to Rev. Peter Cook's attention through a Nuns on the Bus tour. Cook, executive director of the New York State Council of Churches and its 7,500 congregations, and himself an ordained United Church of Christ minister, said the council collaborated with Nuns on the Bus on tax policy and a threatened rollback on the Affordable Care Act. Earlier this year, he collaborated with NETWORK on the "Care Not Cuts" rally NETWORK held in Long Island.

"With NETWORK, we thought they'd have the right approach, and they had a pretty good plan. We kind of piggybacked on that," he says. "We're always down for a fight at the federal level because it always has such an impact on the state."

The NETWORK partnership works, says Cook: "Roman Catholics are well grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, which has a lot of depth — theological depth — to it, and it's very compatible with the position statements of our (nine) denominations. But I appreciate the depth of thought that goes into the social positions, and also particularly among religious ... sisters."

"We trust them, and they give a good social justice opinion on issues before Congress. They've already done their homework," echoes William Hurley, a team member from Washingtonville, N.Y. "I know it's in line with where I want to go as a Catholic."

Members of the New York team met in February with the staff of their representative, Rep. Claudia Tenney (NY-24), a Republican who is not often aligned with NETWORK on justice issues.

"The staff expressed gratitude for the opportunity for conversation. Tenney puts out a weekly newsletter and puts out her record and an explanation on why she voted [as she did]," Kiefer says. "We commended her staff for that."



Peter Cook, executive director of the New York State Council of Churches, participates in a NETWORK "Care Not Cuts" rally NETWORK on Long Island on May 22.

Transforming Politics

In addition to building relationships, whether in their communities or in engagement with elected officials who may or may not share their priorities, the New York Advocates team has a robust track record of taking action to raise awareness on key issues and spurring people to greater action.

Team member and organizational partner Serena Martin Liguori is the executive director of New Hour for Women and Children on Long Island, which advocates for marginalized women and mothers who have been arrested or incarcerated, or have had family who have been incarcerated. Martin Liguori helped to organize and participated in NETWORK's Care Not Cuts rally on Long Island in May. The event, which drew over

85 attendees and 12 community organizations, opposed proposed cuts in the federal budget to essential human programs providing food, housing, and healthcare.

"It was wonderful to bring together the faith-based and the local community — justice-impacted folks, folks who really rely on the system," says Martin Liguori.

"It was wonderful to bring together the faith-based and the local community — justice-impacted folks, folks who really rely on the system."

SERENA MARTIN LIGUORI

Other New York NETWORK Advocates Team members planned and hosted a "repair and redress" reparations prayer vigil last year in Rochester. The event pressed for support for H.R. 40, a bill that would create a commission to study the lasting impacts of slavery and Jim Crow in the U.S. and the possibility of reparations for Black Americans. It was one of four reparations events held by members of the team in different parts of the state—one of which included Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), H.R. 40's chief proponent.

H.R.40 was first introduced in 1989 by former Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) and has been introduced in every Congress since. The bill has yet to come to a House vote, and during the 2020 campaign, President Biden promised to set up such a commission. NETWORK has urged him to do so by executive action.

Sr. Phyllis Tierney, an Advocate Team member and justice coordinator for her community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, says reparations go well beyond slavery and require drawing connections for people to help them understand racist structures and policies through the years that have excluded Black communities from opportunity and deprived them of wealth. One example: the widespread destruction of Black neighborhoods across the country to build interstate highways.

"It really destroyed cities and neighborhoods. That was one of the things that we've talked about: to give examples, and local examples, that people would talk about and understand," Sr. Phyllis says of the education, conversion, and the dismantling of systemic racism that must precede political transformation. "It really brought out the reason for doing this prayer vigil. ... It was certainly good consciousness-raising." ☀️

The Need for Welcoming Communities

Congress Can Invest in Welcoming Asylum Seekers Across the U.S.

BY JENN MORSON

“Immigrants and Asylum Seekers Welcome Here!” read the signs held by a handful of supporters stationed behind the podium as several speakers, including three supportive members of Congress, gathered to deliver a letter to Congress signed by over 7,000 Catholics. Gathered September 13 on the U.S. Capitol grounds, members of NETWORK Lobby and other organizations including the International Mayan League, Church World Service, and Women’s Refugee Commission joyfully and emphatically laid out their hopes for a shift in how the U.S. government approaches its response to asylum seekers.

In her opening remarks, Ronnate Asirwatham, Government Relations Director of NETWORK, stated that the purpose of the gathering was to call on Congress to invest in welcoming communities. “Who are welcoming communities?” Asirwatham said, “To put it bluntly, welcoming communities are our community. People who welcome are all of us. It is very natural to welcome. We welcome each other, we welcome strangers, we welcome people seeking safety, and people passing through.” “While it is most natural to welcome, it seems today that the voices against welcome, especially against welcoming people seeking asylum, [are] getting louder,” Asirwatham warned. “State and federal governments are moving to criminalize welcome. In Arizona, people are being arrested for leaving water out in the desert. In Florida, people are afraid to take their neighbors to the doctor because of pushback. And in Texas, people seeking safety are being pushed back, and Texans wanting to provide them water are not being allowed to.”

In spite of these obstacles, Asirwatham comforted those gathered, saying, “We are not going anywhere. Congress will hear us. Congress must act and enact laws and policies that support us, the American people, that allow us to thrive and reap the benefits that welcoming our fellow human beings allow. This is why our message is simple: we are asking Congress to invest in welcoming communities. We are simply asking Congress to invest in us.”

Gathered Together

Asirwatham introduced many compelling speakers who gave testimony of their own advocacy work as they also encouraged Congress to invest in welcoming communities. Speakers at the

press conferences were optimistic despite the strongly worded letter calling for a renewed sense of justice.

U.S. Congressman Joaquin Castro (TX-20) addressed the crowd, thanking NETWORK for being a voice of compassion, conscience, dignity, and reason for human beings. Castro’s own mother previously served on the board of NETWORK. “Your voice and your activism is needed more today than ever,” Castro said. “We need to remind politicians who use migrants as political scarecrows — because that’s what they do, they use them as scarecrows to engender fear and resentment among the American people — we should remind our fellow Americans and mostly politicians that America became the strongest nation on earth not in spite of immigrants but because of immigrants.”

“Instead of embracing our rich immigrant heritage, too many politicians have used our immigrant communities as political pawns by fearmongering and peddling harmful, dangerous, political rhetoric. And the human cost is immense,” said Rep. Judy Chu (CA-28) in her remarks.

Lifting up the leadership and vision of Pope Francis, Rep. Luis Correa (CA-46) said, “One human being suffering around the world is one human being too much.”

In her moving testimony that referenced her own plight as a refugee from Guatemala, Juanita Cabrera Lopez, Executive Director of International Mayan League, gave a message of hope: “I know firsthand what it looks like when a community invests in welcome and justice, and I know it is possible today because many communities are already doing this work.”

Regarding the immigration of Indigenous Peoples, Cabrera Lopez said, “Our ask remains the same. We need long-term investment to continue welcoming asylum seekers, particularly Indigenous asylum seekers.” Cabrera Lopez concluded her speech with a call for investing in shelter for newly arriving families and youth.

Sent Forth

Sister Eilis McCulloh, HM, encouraged those gathered to extend their hands in prayer over the letter to Congress, as Sister Alicia Zapata, RSM, and Sister Karen Burke, CSJ, prayed in gratitude for the signers of the letter while also offering prayers for immigrants, organizations that support immigrants, and

for the openness of members of Congress to the message of the letter.

“May this letter, which carries the stories of our immigrant siblings and our hope for immigration reform, be one way that we share in Jesus’ mission to ‘welcome the stranger’ and advocate for immigration policies that invest in communities,” they prayed.

The letter, which was co-sponsored by Hope Border Institute, Kino Border Initiative, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, and St. Columban Mission for Justice, Peace, and Ecology, was addressed to key House and Senate members. It begins with Pope Francis’ 2015 remarks to Congress, in which he urged those gathered to welcome the stranger. The signatories are asking Congress to appropriate funds for supporting immigrants and communities while divesting from programs which militarize the border and criminalize immigrants.

In order to accomplish these goals, the letter urges Congress to fully fund the existing Shelter and Services Program at \$800 million in 2024, and to distribute the funding equitably. Additionally, the letter requests that any funding made available is done so via grant or contract rather than as a reimbursement.

Additionally, the letter urges Congress to take back all funding for the border wall construction that has not yet been spent and cut funding for Customs and Border Protection and



Sr. Susan Wilcox, CSJ, of Brooklyn, N.Y. shares her account of coordinating and serving meals to people seeking asylum who had been bused to New York. She noted how her efforts would benefit from Congress funding the Shelter and Services Program (SSP), which would shift the U.S. response to asylum seekers from militarization at the border to investment in communities across the country who offer a welcoming response to asylum seekers.



Sr. Elis McCulloh, HM, holds up a copy of the letter signed by over 7,000 Catholics from all 50 U.S. states calling on Congress to invest in communities who welcome asylum seekers, while Sr. Karen Burke, CSJ, and Sr. Alicia Zapata, RSM, pray a blessing over the letter at the conclusion of NETWORK’s Sept. 13 action on Capitol Hill.

all other militarized border enforcement agents and technologies, as these agencies are over-staffed and overfunded.

NETWORK and its partners remind Congress that seeking asylum is a human right that should not be restricted, and invite them to embrace the Catholic belief of the inherent dignity of every person and make this a guiding principle to immigration policies, moving away from militarization and towards care.

In the words of Sister Susan Wilcox, CSJ, “We are doing the work. We have the solutions. We just need a little help.”





[Left] Rep. Luis Correa (CA-46) speaks at NETWORK's Sept. 13 "Invest in Welcoming Communities" event on Capitol Hill calling on Congress to fund the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) and invest in communities who welcome asylum seekers.



[Above] Rep. Joaquin Castro (TX-20) speaks on how immigrants have strengthened the U.S. and how elected officials have a responsibility to treat them humanely.

[Below] Danilo Zak of Church World Service describes the immense good accomplished by the SSP in a short time.



[Left] Amy Fisher of Migrant Solidarity Mutual Aid speaks on transforming the racist publicity stunt of bussing migrants into "an act of beautiful welcome."

[Right] Katharina Obser of the Women's Refugee Commission speaks about the inadequacy of enforcement measures at the border to meet the needs of people seeking safety in another country.



[Below] Mary J. Novak, NETWORK Executive Director, ties care for asylum seekers to the teaching of Pope Francis.



[Above] Juanita Cabrera Lopez of the International Mayan League shares how Black, Brown, and Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by the factors that cause people to flee their homes and seek asylum in the U.S.





[Left] Sr. Susan Wilcox, CSJ (far left), Sr. Karen Burke, CSJ (second from right), and Sr. Alicia Zapata, RSM (right) join NETWORK's Ronnate Asirwatham in delivering a copy of NETWORK's immigration sign-on letter to staff of Sen. Patty Murray of Washington on Sept. 13.



[Right] Min. Christian Watkins, NETWORK Government Relations Advocate, participates in an H.R. 40 action outside the White House -on Aug. 25. *Courtesy Nina Kavyn Photography*

[Right] Sr. Anita Baird, DHM, a NETWORK board member, participates in an Aug. 28 panel commemorating the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington hosted by Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. *Photo: Georgetown University/ Lisa Helfert*



[Far left] Advocates Paula Cruickshank and Carol Matheny attend NETWORK's Sept. 13 Invest in Welcoming Communities event.

[Middle] Ronnate Asirwatham, NETWORK Government Relations Director, stands next to Rep. Joaquin Castro.

[Right] Rep. Judy Chu (CA-28) speaks with Ronnate Asirwatham and NETWORK Executive Director Mary J. Novak on Capitol Hill on Sept. 13.

Faith in Democracy

Nichole Flores on Catholic Teaching's Power to Fight Hate

Dr. Nichole Flores is an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia. Her work focuses on issues of justice, democracy, migration, family, gender, and economics. She is Catholic, Latina, a wife, a mother, and like so many residents of Charlottesville, she witnessed the unthinkable when white supremacists with tiki torches marched on her city in 2017 and killed one young activist, Heather Heyer.

Dr. Flores recently spoke with NET-WORK about democracy, public theology, and community in the wake of the Charlottesville attack. The following is an excerpt of that conversation.

How did your early life steer you toward teaching and writing on religious studies and Catholic ethics, justice, and democracy?

NF: I think the originating event was bearing witness to the faith of my grandmother, Maria Guadalupe Garcia Flores. Like so many of us, I was inspired by my grandmother's faith, which passed on to me in a really profound way.

When I began studying theology, I realized that to be a Latina theologian and to have witnessed what I had witnessed in my grandmother's life, in the lives of my family, and in my community meant that theology necessarily had a public and a social orientation. I had to pay attention to those things that were most challenging for our communities, and to think about them theologically. What does theology have to say about poverty, about anti-immigrant sentiment, about racism? That guided me in this direction, in addition to just an innate love for politics.

Can you tell us about your experience of the events in Charlottesville in August 2017?

NF: My narrative of these events is deeply informed by the activists and specifically the religious activist community in Charlottesville, of which I count myself a part. One of the young activists at the forefront of the response, who also happens to be one of my former students, Zayana Bryant, likes to say, "Charlottesville is not just a moment, it's not just a hashtag, it's a movement."

It's important to understand that local activists refer to not just that day of August 12 but to that summer as the "Summer of Hate" in Charlottesville. There were several rallies leading up to August 12. The community was very aware that the Unite the Right rally was being organized and was trying to sound the alarm bells early on. I think the rest of the world was really surprised by what happened. But those who had been paying attention in Charlottesville were not at all surprised. And that was even more devastating, because a lot of people put in a lot of energy trying to mobilize religious communities and activist networks, and get more support in town. Those connections didn't really materialize at the level that could have made a difference and saved more lives. So that's a part of the story.

At the time, I had just found out that I was pregnant with my first child. I had flown to Denver with my husband to share the news with my family. We watched all of this unfolding from 2,000 miles away, which was difficult, especially given that we had been concerned and had tried to show up in protest earlier in



the summer. The local truly became national and global in that moment.

Because of our experiences in Charlottesville, our community was not terribly surprised by what happened on January 6. It resembled very closely what we had survived in our town, including the lead up, the kind of violence, and the people who were involved with the violence. It's interesting how that on-the-ground experience has shaped the consciousness of our community. We have this devastating, first-hand knowledge of what can happen when we don't take these threats seriously.

What has happened since then?

NF: Charlottesville is just like any other city with a lot of welcome but also challenging diversity in experience, politics, and socioeconomics. The Catholic community in Charlottesville, with just a handful of parishes, has everybody from frontline leaders of the resistance who put their lives on the line for Black Lives Matter, to people who were writing and talking about it, like me, to people who were horrified but didn't really do anything in terms of direct action, to people who were kind of neutral. These people are all Catholic, and we're all communing together.

This has been a real challenge for me not just in my calling as a Catholic theologian, but also in my calling as a Catholic mom who goes to Mass and participates in my parish because I want to love the people in my community as Christ loves. It is really, really challenging when I see openness to these ideologies that are a threat to my community, especially to our Black and Jewish siblings, who were very explicitly targets. In Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity is a virtue. An approach of solidarity helps me to hold all of these challenging things. I love the people sitting in the pews next to me, but I also strongly object to many of the ways that people have responded to this incident.

Even though I've been concerned and even disappointed at times by the response of our Catholic community in Charlottesville, the movement has really unfolded and been committed to making Charlottesville a better place to live in a broader, more comprehensive way. Responding to instances of white supremacy, successfully campaigning to remove Confederate statues that mark public space in our town as unsafe for Black and Brown people, providing support and community for migrants and refugees, advocating better zoning laws so more people can afford to live with dignity in the city where they work... — there is so much great work happening in Charlottesville in response to this event that I think is really inspiring.

You mentioned watching these events while pregnant. What are the lessons or insights you want to pass down?

NF: Because that baby is now 5 years old, I think about this a lot, and the importance of teaching him that he belongs to this community and thus has responsibility for things that maybe he wasn't even born for. I'm trying to instill an awareness that these injustices exist, but not

stopping there — that he has power and responsibility for responding to them. What does this world look like when all our friends are valued and their dignity acknowledged in ways that lift them up?

How can public theologians change the discussion around democracy in the U.S.?

NF: Those who are reflecting theological-ly in this context of a democracy that's being tested have the opportunity to set the discourse. As someone in a public university where I teach mostly non-Catholic students, I think there are resources from within our beautiful, multifaceted Catholic tradition that can help our entire society to think well about the challenges that we are facing in a democracy. Now, in a political environment where a lot of people are justly on guard for the creeping theocracy, we have to be very wise and judicious about how we introduce resources for public consideration. But I do think it can be done.

I wrote a book on Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her symbol, even though it is profoundly Mexican and super Catholic, appeals to so many people and invites them to think about what justice and flourishing means. Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers were able to show other activists and organizers how a symbol, a very particularly religious symbol like Guadalupe, could be so powerful for people who had never heard her story.

Can religious arguments really change people's minds?

NF: I think that they have and they can, but it is a process of communication and of making them accessible to the public. And that's one of the things that I very much admire about NETWORK's work in the community.

How can our concepts be relayed in a way that neither waters them down nor

alienates people? Catholic Social Teaching is a wonderful place to start because these concepts are profoundly Catholic, but they also resonate with people who are not Catholic. If we explain clearly what we mean by common good and common life, people are really amenable to that vision. The same with solidarity.

We have a deeply Christ-centered, grounded understanding of solidarity and we can bring the richness, thoughtfulness, and prayerfulness of our tradition to bear on this larger conversation.

You taught a course called "Faith in Democracy." Where do you find faith and hope in our democracy?

NF: I think back to that experience of being pregnant with this beautiful baby, witnessing devastating events that would rightly make someone feel despair. Why do we do what we do if this is just how people are going to react?

We were bringing life into the world even as these awful things were happening. We had hope in this little person. It's been very special and profound to watch him grow up, to see the values he's already been able to cultivate, this little hope, this little light. To see how he has been shaped by this community in ways that are so positive underscores the hope that I have.

I'm kind of obsessed with Advent, because it's a season where we reflect deeply on what it means to gestate and to give birth. In doing that, we create room for another person. And that's a profoundly democratic thing to do, right? And a profoundly Catholic thing to do. There's a lot of richness there, and that continues to motivate me even when things are decidedly still difficult in our society.

Hear more of this conversation on the 'Just Politics' podcast:

uscatholic.org/nichole-flores 

Visionary Goals

Devoting Ourselves to Transformation Brings Out Our Best

When I was a kid, I was mildly obsessed with NASA — particularly the Apollo missions to the moon. Because of this, I admired President Kennedy, who set a goal to send astronauts to the moon and inspired the American people to champion his vision. In a speech at Rice University, he said, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy but because they are hard. Because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.”

As I grew older, I started to encounter the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other visionary leaders who rallied our country to come together across division. They saw the fight for racial and economic justice as inextricably intertwined. They strove to build and sustain what Fred Hampton called a Rainbow Coalition, recognizing that our fates are linked.

Today, we benefit from the many fruits of their visions. We carry cellphones in our pockets that exist because of the vast technological leaps provided by the research and brilliant intellect that went into the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions and beyond. We have landmark legislation, the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, that have moved us closer to racial justice because of Black-led, multiracial, multi-faith campaigns that withstood white supremacist violence to create a better world for us all.

We have made astounding progress thanks to the work of so many visionary leaders — people just like you and me who stood up and proclaimed that we could live in a better world if we could come together toward a common goal.

Over the past decade, though, it seems like we’ve lost so much ground. Supreme Court decisions have stripped the Voting Rights Act of vital protections. Leading candidates for public office stoke racism and misogyny with no negative consequences. And many family bonds are frayed along ideological lines — with people unwilling to recognize the humanity bestowed by God in their loved ones, and all too willing to stop talking to one another.

Several years ago, I encountered the words of Civil Rights icon and public theologian Ruby Sales in her interview with Krista Tippett of *On Being*. She said “I really think that one of the things that we’ve got to deal with is that — how is it that we develop a theology or theologies in a 21st-century capitalist technocracy where only a few lives matter? How do we raise people up from disposability to essentiality?” She goes on to say that this goes beyond the question of race, recognizing the basic

dignity and the very real pain that so many people — Black and white — are experiencing in our world today.

When it comes down to it, most of us — no matter what we look like or where we get our news — want the same things. We want to live in safety. We want to love and be loved. We want enough food to eat and some comfort in our lives. We want to contribute to our families and communities. We want meaningful work — whether paid employment, care for family, or volunteer work (care for community). And we want that work to pay us fairly so that we can support our families and contribute to our communities.

Lately, though, it seems that people cling so tightly to political parties and identifying labels that we can’t seem to find common ground on anything. A few wealthy individuals and greedy politicians seek to divide us along ideological lines by strategically stoking a history of racial bias so that they can distract us while they dismantle our democracy and manipulate the economy to serve their interests.

The results of this strategic use of division and racism are stark: a real and ongoing threat of political violence, multiple days this summer of new domestic and global record-setting high temperatures, unaffordable housing costs, and a wealth gap between the rich and the poor that’s greater today than it was in the Gilded Age that preceded the Great Depression.

These things hurt all of us!

But it doesn’t have to be this way. We are people of hope. We believe in human dignity and are capable of treating everyone around us with the dignity they deserve. By doing so, we can begin to open up a path for transformation for those close to us, and to people in our community. When we begin by transforming our own hearts and minds, we can bring others along with us and, together, transform our whole political climate.

What if — instead of naming our enemies as each other — we come together to achieve a common goal as visionary leaders did in the past? This will require the best of all of us, much like we did as a nation when we took on the space race. What if we embraced a race to end poverty, a race to house the unhoused, a race for compassion and humanity? Not because they are easy, but because they bring out the very best each of us has to offer.



Sr. Emily TeKolste, SP, is NETWORK’s Grassroots Mobilization Coordinator.

Tax Justice is Racial Justice

Undo the Hidden Racism of the U.S. Tax Code

It is no secret that the U.S. suffers from a staggering degree of wealth inequality. Resources are increasingly concentrated in the possession of the top 1 percent, creating a degree of inequality never before seen in the country's history.

This wealth stratification is most acute across racial lines. A Pew Research study in 2016 found the median income of white households was \$117,000, while Black households had only \$17,000. And while a white person in the U.S. has an equal chance of being a millionaire and having no wealth, a Black person is 20 times more likely to have no wealth than to be a millionaire. Between 1983 and 2016, Black wealth decreased year over year, and education did not stop this trend.

This vast inequality did not happen by chance. As NETWORK's Racial Wealth and Income Gap workshop helps to illustrate, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Jim Crow, and centuries of the U.S. government's racist policies created and still preserve this hoarding of wealth in the hands of a small class of white folks. Many of these policies shaped our tax system. Indeed, the U.S. tax code plays a central role in not only keeping rich people rich, but also rewarding white people at the expense of Black folks.

The marriage joint filing bonus, for example, privileges married couples, especially when one spouse makes high income while the other isn't employed. A high earner can split their income with their spouse, and thus split their tax liability. Usually, these couples are white, as the highest-earning demographic in the country is overwhelmingly white. Because Black married households make the least household income in the country, rarely does one member of the household make enough money to enable their spouse to stay at home. Joint filing or married filing separate tax incentives do not help Black or Brown households because they earn so little income compared to their white counterparts.

In addition, tax incentives are structured to reward the things that wealthier, white folks can afford. For example, there are tax incentives for home ownership, but not for renting or for buying cars. Moreover, medical insurance is tax-deductible, but medical debt is not — penalizing Black and Brown communities who face inequities in access to affordable health care.

Long-term capital gains, usually enjoyed by white wealthy folks, are taxed at a lower rate than “ordinary income” — that is, wages, salaries, or even short-term capital gains. In 2021, an unmarried middle-income worker like a teacher or truck driver paid 22 percent of income tax on every dollar of taxable salary she made over \$40,525. Meanwhile, a billionaire living entirely



off long-term capital gains or dividends paid no more than 20 percent on millions of dollars of unearned income.

Over the past several centuries, white families have been able to amass wealth off the backs of enslaved and underpaid workers. They then pass that wealth on to their descendants, usually without having to pay their fair share of taxes on what is passed down. The tax code specifically protects this preservation of generational wealth in white families, and even helps it build up, by providing tax benefits to assets that are inherited. Under one policy called “Step Up in Basis,” if the owner of an investment or asset that has increased in value dies, neither the owner nor the inheritor owes any tax on that gain!

We know that for all nations, not just the United States, social and health outcomes — including for the richest folks — are worse in countries with high wealth inequality. Wealth inequality is immoral. It harms the most vulnerable and marginalized among us, especially Black and Brown communities, and it harms the wellbeing of the country as a whole.

The fact that racism is written into our tax code makes three things clear. First, it confirms that racism is systemic and is enacted through policies and structures. Second, the road to equality is reparations now, to begin to heal our society and close the ever-widening gap between those who have been allowed to amass and hoard resources, and those who have had to go without — so that all communities can truly thrive. And third, as we think, dream, and envision a future with reparations, transforming the tax code must be part of what it means to repair and build anew our society.

Jarrett Smith, pictured above at an August 25 reparations event outside the White House, is a NETWORK Government Relations Advocate.

It's Time for an Income Floor

Recent Crises Prove That We Can End Poverty in the U.S.



My father, John S. Watson, instilled a core value that is my guiding principle: “To whom much is given, much is required.” This mantra from the Gospel of Luke was the impetus for my run for Congress.

Now that I have the privilege to represent New Jersey’s 12th congressional district in Congress, my core belief can be summed up around this concept: In the United States of America, there is a floor below which we should never allow any child, any family, or any person to fall. We have an obligation to ensure that every American is entitled to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness and has an equal opportunity to chase the American dream.

However, many of us know that it is difficult to achieve these pursuits without economic security. Anti-poverty advocates understand the wide array of factors that cause Americans to fall below this floor. It is time for us to evaluate what economic security means for all.

During my time in Congress, I have been fighting to close the wealth gap and ensure that all Americans receive a fair wage; a living wage, which data from the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning estimates would be \$25.02 per hour, or \$104,077.70 for a family of four. It is simply a moral outrage that there are millions of Americans surviving on wages below what is necessary to support themselves and their families. The arbitrary minimum wage — which is variously set between \$7.25 per hour and \$17.00 per hour depending on where one works — is simply not enough. The inability of millions of families to meet their basic needs, such as food, health care, clothing, and shelter in the richest country in the world is shameful.

Fortunately, we have the power to guarantee all Americans an income sufficient to care for their families in a safe, secure home, to afford quality medical care, and to secure a good education.

The concept of a guaranteed income, or directly giving unrestricted cash to people, offers dignity and self-determination for recipients. A one-size-fits-all approach to providing economic assistance to Americans combats the antiquated and misguided notions of deservedness rooted in distrust. As Dorothy Day said, “The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.” All people, as children of God, deserve the necessities of life.

Guaranteed income also has historical relevance and was — and still is — a centerpiece demand of the Poor People’s Campaign, the movement to economically empower America’s most vulnerable. Martin Luther King, Jr. praised the idea of guaranteed income, stating that “the dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement.”

My piece of legislation I authored, the Guaranteed Income Pilot Program Act, would establish a nationwide pilot program to test the outcomes of a federally funded income support program that would keep more American families from experiencing permanent financial fallout and lasting poverty from a single unexpected crisis.

We have seen the devastating impacts of the pandemic on our economy. At the same time, the government’s response has demonstrated that there is a real and meaningful ability for federal programs to keep Americans out of poverty. The interventions taken by the federal government, in fact, led to one of the steepest declines in poverty in American history including a 50 percent decline in poverty among children. Every effort should be taken to make these programs permanent. The success of lowering poverty during an economic crisis further proves that, in modern economies, poverty is a choice.

Black women sit at the core of our economy, and yet they are routinely the last to benefit from economic booms and the first to suffer from downturns. This instability has a devastating effect on families and communities. The security and stability of a guaranteed income would unleash untold economic opportunities; the ripple from this transformative change would reach all corners of our economy.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that, when John answered to the crowd, he said “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” (3:11) What was accomplished to cut poverty during the COVID crisis shows us what is possible when our actions are in line with our priorities. We now have the opportunity to reimagine how we address the suffering of the most vulnerable in our society. There is no reason we can’t live in a world without poverty.

Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman has represented New Jersey’s 12th Congressional District since 2015.



THANK YOU

With grateful hearts, we thank all those who joined us in celebrating our 50th Anniversary, including those who contributed to build our Endowment Fund. Through your gift, you help fulfill our shared duty to future generations to ensure justice will flourish for us all. Thank you for joining in to sustain the future of our political ministry.

We gratefully recognize the following organizations and individuals who contributed a collective total of \$5 million to the NETWORK 50th Anniversary Endowment Fund during our campaign, which publicly launched at our 50th Anniversary Justice Ablaze Gala in April 2022 and ran through April 2023. If your name was omitted or was recorded incorrectly, we hope you will understand and inform us so we may make a correction on our website.

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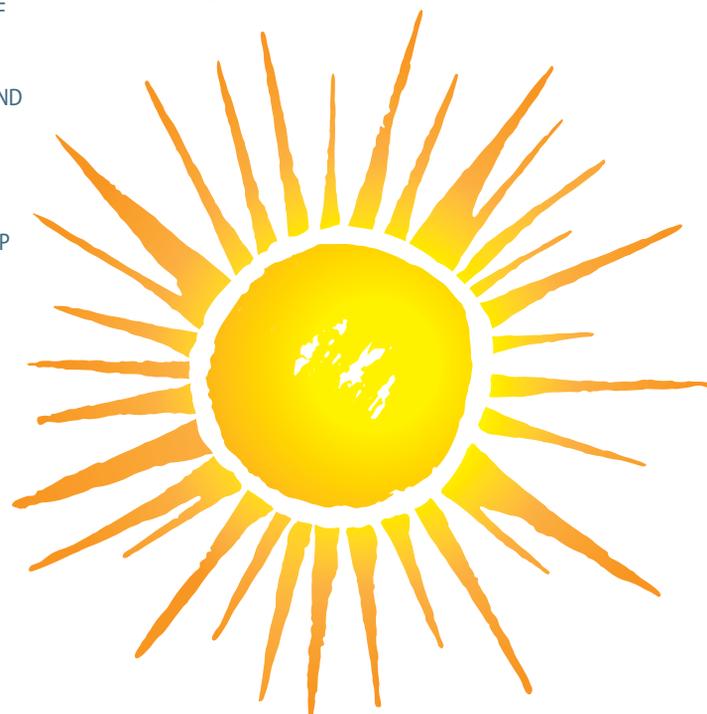
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Ms. Joan F. Neal

Dr. Robert P. Jones

Fr. Bryan Massingale