

Word & World

by Joyce Hollyday

published in Sojourners Magazine

On a recent Sunday at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, prayers of mourning were offered for a group of Mexicans—including a two-and-a-half-year-old child—who had died the previous week trying to reach the U.S. border. Volunteers were solicited for “Samaritan patrols” in the desert, where temperatures had reached well over one hundred degrees, to carry water and transport refugees to safety. Almost two decades after leaders in the Sanctuary Movement were arrested and put on trial for similar actions, the “conspiracy of compassion” continues.

Tucson—with its proximity to the Mexican border, its indigenous cultures and desert spirituality, its long history of labor and environmental struggles—provides a unique space in which to take a stand to live out the Word of God. It is an appropriate next stop for a “moveable feast” known as Word and World, a new educational venture based on the belief that rich theological and social reflection arises when the Word of God and the realities of the world come into dialogue in a local context.

The first “Word & World” school was convened in April in Greensboro, North Carolina, a perfect place to launch this radical discipleship endeavor that involved participants from all over the United States and five other nations. Visits were made to the downtown Woolworth’s, where the first lunch-counter sit-in sparked the student movement of the Civil Rights era; and to the site of the 1979 massacre of marchers by Klan and Nazi members—sacred spaces where we paused to pray and remember. Participants and witnesses to these events—and to ongoing struggles around labor and race issues—were our teachers, inviting us every morning into their powerful stories.

Our afternoons were given to Bible study and classes based on church and social practices, covering such themes as movement history, the Beloved Community, spirituality and struggle, restorative justice, the arts and social change, and global violence. A “circle of elders” offered wise counsel and reflection. Dr. Vincent Harding brought his long experience with freedom movements, as well as the faces and voices of some of his colleagues in the Civil Rights struggle through the “Veterans of Hope” videotape project. Throughout the week, the power of the Bible, the poignancy of Greensboro, and the pain and promise of our current political situation remained in constant conversation as we wrestled with biblical texts, social analysis, and hope.

Our spirits were uplifted by offerings of music and poetry, from the first whispers of early-morning prayer to the last camp song offered around the bonfire late at night. Wednesday evening provided an opportunity for the gathered “Word & World” community and the local Greensboro community to offer gifts to one another, a rich celebration of song and sharing. Our closing communion on Friday night elicited tears of joy and testimonies of gratitude for a most amazing week.

Now we are setting our sights on Tucson. The week there will follow the same structure, interweaving personal stories, Bible study, social analysis, and worship. Visits will be made to sacred sites in the desert and border area. Mentors in the “conspiracy of compassion” on the border will be our witnesses and teachers. If Greensboro is any indication, Tucson—and all the sites to come (we hope there will be many)—promises to be a rich feast. If you are an activist or advocate, if you serve soup or work for peace,

if you're committed to faith-based social transformation and hunger for an inspiring week with kindred souls, please consider joining us.

Joyce Hollyday, an associate conference minister for the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ, is on the National Board and faculty of Word and World.