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Q&As
Social Justice

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell poses with a bowl of shamrocks, a gift from the nation of Ireland to the United States, on March 17 [2022] at a St. Patrick's Day celebration at the White House in Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of Sr. Simone Campbell)

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Just over a year ago, Sr. Simone Campbell left her position as executive director of the Catholic social justice lobby Network, a post that had made her one of the most prominent women religious in the United States.

So, what has the member of the Sisters of Social Service been up to since then? Quite a bit, which isn't a surprise to anyone who knows her.

But first, after 17 years at Network, she needed a break.

***GSR*: You left Network at the end of March 2021. How long did it take you to shift gears from that frenetic pace to something slower?**

Campbell: I did a retreat, took a sabbatical, read trashy mysteries and then did some travel. But the biggest surprise was that I didn't know how tired I was. It took me a good long while to get rested.

I had worked flat-out through the 2020 election, then the transition, then Jan. 6 happened and all of the response to that, then preparing for the transition [to a new executive director] at Network. I was surprised in April and May how tired I was. Just being able to take a nap was amazing. It was like Wile E. Coyote going full blast and then falling off the cliff and bam! Nothing.

Were you worn out spiritually?

One of the things about working at Network was that for me, it required a keen spiritual engagement, so I didn't feel spiritually weary before or after I left. I felt keenly engaged and spiritually grounded.

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, addresses the second session of the Democratic National Convention on Sept. 5, 2012, in Charlotte, North Carolina. (CNS/Reuters/Jason Reed)

You wrote a book about how meditation helped you survive such a busy life. I assume you still meditate.

That definitely continues. That has been an anchor in this. When I decided my sabbatical was over at the end of August, I set my alarm clock for my usual 5 a.m., got up and did my meditation, and when I was done, it was 6 o'clock. Now what? I realized that even though my sabbatical was over, I could sleep in. So now, I get up at 6 o'clock.

How was the travel?

I got to meet my friends in Taizé, France. I was there two weeks, which was glorious. I didn't spend any time in Paris; I just went right to the countryside.

There was a lull in the COVID-19 pandemic, and France had opened up a little. I was able to get tested, and it was pretty easy when I got there, but leading up to that, I wasn't sure it would be possible, but it worked out.

I got to spend Pentecost with my community [in California] — that was a great renewal. But I was a 100,000-mile flyer on United for 10 years, so to not travel at all during the pandemic was tough.

I found that the thing I missed most during the pandemic was: When I'd travel, I'd meet all these people on the sidelines of the events, and they gave me all these other perspectives as they told their stories. Everyone hates having to use Zoom, but praise God for it — I can't imagine the pandemic without it.

Related: At Capitol Hill gala, Network celebrates 50 years of lobbying for social justice

So now that you've done your retreat and finished your sabbatical and travel, what are you up to?

I'm working on a project where we're trying to create dialogue between Democrats and Republicans. We're not trying to change anyone's mind; we're trying to strengthen the middle so we can meet across the divide. But [the group is] having an impossible time getting any conservatives to join.

We're calling it "Understanding US," and our effort is to work in small groups to get people to talk to people who think differently than they do, where you'll learn skills to talk to difficult people then go out and try it and come back and share what you learned. The idea is that even though you differ in politics, you have a sense of connectedness, and when you come back, you have an experience to share that is community building.

What got me into this was the impact of our rural roundtables in 2019 and 2020, which we did because the politics looked so divisive between urban and rural areas. One of the things that happened was there were people with different perspectives but a shared unity around geography. So, we're trying to bring people together with a defined common denominator. If there's a sense of unity to begin with, then where the differences are just emerge as part of the process rather than the defining feature.

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When can we expect to see this?

We're going to start in Ohio with a test case. We're going to start by Zoom, but we're hoping by summer to be able to do it in person.

There's no funding. We're just doing it on our good looks so far. But we got a PR firm that's helping us do the branding and website. We hope to have that up by June.

We really wanted people from both sides, and people have been interested, but all the conservatives I've talked to said they would be involved, but they won't be on the leadership team or do anything public.

I think the need is strong enough, and as long as we stay faithful to the need, the Spirit will respond.

Timeline by Pam Hackenmiller