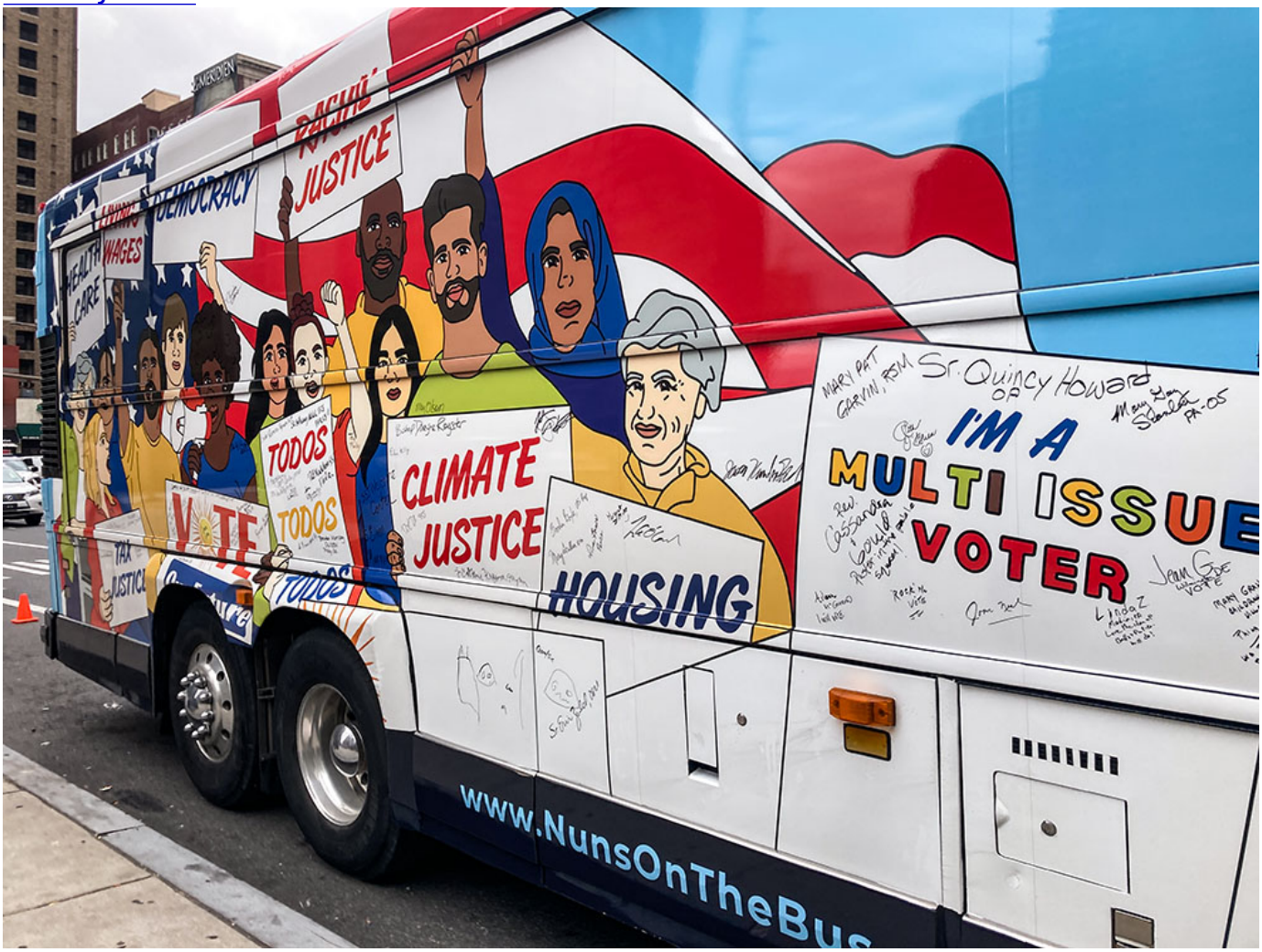
News
Social Justice



Every election year, the Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice takes to the road with Nuns on the Bus, a cross-country tour that educates voters on multi-issue voting. (GSR photo/Carol Zimmermann)



by Carol Zimmermann

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They're back.

After a six-year hiatus, the Nuns on the Bus are once again taking their election education campaign to the streets.

They have been down this road before, starting in 2012, and have since made six other cross- country treks and a virtual tour in 2020 during the pandemic. Each year's bus ride has had specific themes, but they've all had the recurring message of encouraging people to vote and to think about all the issues at stake in the elections, something that is highlighted at the rallies and town hall stops along the way.

What's different with this year's "Vote Our Future" tour, a project of the Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, is that the riders are not all women religious, which is why this year it's called "Nuns on the Bus and Friends." On the three different legs of this two-and-a-half-week journey — 20 stops from Philadelphia to San Francisco — the bus will be filled with a rotating group of 15 sisters and 15 advocacy representatives.

> 'We carry the concerns of people we meet along the way.'
>
> —Sr. Robbie Pentecost, member of the Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg, Indiana
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But the sisters are still a big draw. In fact, for the tour's kickoff rally Sept. 30 in Philadelphia, a group of about 20 local sisters, the Sisters of St. Joseph, came to support fellow traveling sisters. And in the rally crowd of about 70 people gathered to send the bus on its way at JFK Plaza — also known as Love Park for its famous sculpture — were plenty of other sisters holding aloft placards or wearing T-shirts promoting the tour. Some had been on previous rides; others help on the ground

with advocacy work.

The dozens of speakers addressed this crowd while standing in front of the pale blue bus parked on the street near City Hall. They were pretty much preaching to the choir in reminding them of the importance to get out and vote as a sacred duty, and to be multi-issue voters looking at where candidates stand on immigration, child tax credits, climate change, housing, health care and racial justice.

But some tourists and others, walking as they cut through the park or going to take pictures by the sculpture, stopped to listen for a few minutes at least. Network volunteers encouraged the passersby to grab voter resource materials from a table or to scan a QR code and get more voting information.



The crowd gathers between the bus and the Love sculpture in Philadelphia for the Sept. 30 rally to kick off the Nuns on the Bus and Friends tour. (GSR photo/Carol Zimmermann)

Sr. Bridget Connor, a Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart, based in Philadelphia, who had been an educator for nearly 40 years, joked that the rally crowd included a lot of gray-haired nuns. But she also acknowledged that the sisters see this work as "extremely important," and then added that, more than that, "it's essential."

Connor was an educator for nearly 40 years, and many other sisters in the crowd had also spent decades teaching. She saw the sisters' role in this bus tour as continuing this teaching tradition, just in another way.

And the rally speakers, including sisters, a rabbi, two members of Congress and numerous activists, reiterated a similar message of letting people know the urgency of the current election.

Several spoke of the significance of the Philadelphia starting point, calling the city the birthplace of democracy and noting that the state is one of a handful of swing states that could determine the winner of the presidential election.

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"There is no more important state in which to have this kickoff," said Pennsylvania's Rep. Brendan Boyle, a Democrat, noting how the state's voters had determined the 2016 and 2020 presidential races.

"We only have now five weeks," he said. "Let's go out there; let's work hard and vote our values and make sure we get people in elected office who reflect those good and decent values."

Daniel Bauder, president of the AFL-CIO's Philadelphia Council, likewise told the crowd that the "road to Pennsylvania Avenue runs through Pennsylvania."

Speakers highlighted several key issues at stake in this year's election and urged those in the crowd to vote with their consciences and to make sure they spoke to others who might not be voting and encourage them to do so.

After the rally, participants were encouraged to sign the bus with magic markers. St. Joseph Sr. Mary Beth Hamm signed with perfect cursive, reminiscent of old-school days. She told Global Sisters Report that she was on the first Nuns on the Bus ride, an event pulled together in just two months.



St. Joseph Sr. Mary Beth Hamm signs the bus at the Nuns on the Bus and Friends kickoff rally in Philadelphia Sept. 30. (GSR photo/Carol Zimmermann)

That ride had a lot of energy, she said, but added that the needs are just as important today. She also pointed out that many women religious advocate for those in need, and they see the connections of issues from immigration to health care to climate change.

Sr. Robbie Pentecost, a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of Oldenburg, Indiana, who has been working with women in the Appalachian region of Kentucky for the past two decades, was going to be on this year's bus ride — something she has already done three or four times.

She called it a "sacred journey," noting: "We carry the concerns of people we meet along the way."

Those planning to ride the bus and those there to support them spoke of bringing hope to the nation, but not in a lofty way. They spoke in terms of the necessary work ahead and how the responsibility to help others is part of Catholic social teaching. And while they stressed the need to vote, they said the obligation as citizens doesn't end there.

As Mary DiVito, a Network advocate in Philadelphia, put it to GSR after the rally ended: "You have to do more than vote."

This story appears in the **Nuns on the Bus** feature series. View the full series.