News
Social Justice



The bus for the Nuns on the Bus & Friends tour, organized by NETWORK Advocates for Catholic Social Justice, is seen at its Las Vegas stop Oct. 14. (Alecia Westmorland)



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As Sr. Mumbi Kigutha stepped up to the microphone at Cambridge Recreation Center in Las Vegas on Oct. 14, she beamed at the audience seated before her.

"Ever since I was a very small girl growing up in Kenya, I've always wanted to come to this city," announced Kigutha, a member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood and president of Friends in Solidarity, a Catholic ministry supporting religious work in South Sudan. "Because of you, now I'm here."

But Kigutha wasn't in Las Vegas on vacation: She was visiting as part of the nationwide Nuns on the Bus & Friends tour, organized by NETWORK Advocates for Catholic Social Justice, which made its 15th stop in the city famous for neon lights and live entertainment.

And though Kigutha spoke at a facility just a few miles from the glittering hotel-casinos of the Las Vegas Strip, the discussions at the tour's Town Hall to Vote Our Future struck a more sober tone than the revelry occurring along the popular resort corridor.

Upholding the bus tour's mission to mobilize and empower multi-issue voters, the town hall event examined challenges in Southern Nevada often overshadowed by Vegas' dazzling thrills.



Jackie Barney, visiting Las Vegas from Hawaii, pens "aloha" on the Nuns on the Bus vehicle at the Las Vegas stop Oct. 14. (Alecia Westmorland)

Such discussion bears particular importance in Nevada, a swing state that will help determine the outcome of the approaching presidential election, said fellow bus rider Sr. Eilis McCulloh.

"Focusing on a single issue allows other social sins to go unchecked — exploitation, racism, xenophobia, environmental destruction and so many other things," McCulloh, a Sister of the Humility of Mary, said at the start of the event. "We need

policies that advance racial, economic and social justice. When we come together and vote for the common good, we're voting to advance these policies."

With an audience of roughly 20 — composed of religious representatives, nonprofit workers and concerned community members — the town hall featured rousing presentations by several members of the tour's 15 Catholic sisters and 15 multi-faith and secular partners.

Each speaker detailed alarming situations related to pivotal social justice issues that they urged voters to bear in mind when marking their ballots.

St. Joseph Sr. Janet Kinney, who works with the Long Island Immigration Clinic, championed the freedom to live in a welcoming country that values human rights.

She recalled aiding a mother of two who had fled Peru after being abducted and assaulted there as a result of protesting femicide.

"There are many, many stories like this that we hear," Kinney said. "We need to have elected officials who invest in communities that are welcome for all."

St. Joseph Sr. Deirdre Griffin, who ministers as an immigration attorney at the U.S.-Mexico border, advocated supporting federal nutrition assistance programs.

"As the former director of a neighborhood food pantry, I know that this kind of help was crucial to so many of our families," Griffin said. "When the money is tight, the food budget is one place where there can sometimes be flexibility, and it gets cut short."

Kigutha underscored a dire need to address the global impacts of pollution and other environmentally harmful practices. She relayed how children in some areas of Australia and Chile must limit children's outdoor playtime, due to dangerous ozone depletion.

"It's not because those areas of Chile and Australia are filled with people who are destroying the environment," Kigutha said. "It's because the actions of all of us, no matter where we are in the world, have contributed to that reality."

Referencing the nationwide problem of rising housing costs, Sr. Richelle Friedman, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, spoke of a trailer park resident in her Iowa hometown who died after stretching his medication budget to

afford the park's increased lot fees.



Bus riders Lisa Sharon Harper of Freedom Road (left), and Sr. Richelle Friedman (center), a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, listen to a Las Vegas resident's concerns at the bus tour's Town Hall to Vote Our Future in Las Vegas Oct. 14. (Alecia Westmorland)

"Government matters. Who we elect matters," Friedman emphasized. "It's important for families that we elect good people who support [affordable housing] policies."

Amelia Keegan, with the Friends Committee on National Legislation, called for more behavioral health treatment, afterschool enrichment programs and employment opportunities — "community investment and economic security," she said — to reduce factors that contribute to gun violence.

Hearing local concerns

The speakers' words garnered frequent whoops, snaps and applause from the audience. Attendees also had their own chance to speak when the event broke into groups, where bus riders listened to Las Vegas residents' top concerns for their community.

Gustavo Ramos, 84, grieved the lack of affordable housing, not just for seniors but also younger generations.

"I have grandchildren who still can't live on their own," Ramos said.

The Rev. Linda Pilato, an associate pastor at St. Valentine Faith Community in Las Vegas, added that the city's tourism appeal exacerbates the issue, with many homes and apartments offered as vacation rentals on Airbnb, reducing options for locals.

Gary Cavalier, who works for community coalition Nevadans for the Common Good, noted that he sees community members struggling to find and afford housing "every day," and when local governments consider affordable housing projects, "all the neighbors come out to complain."

Louise Rauckhorst, 90, worried about the effects of climate change on Southern Nevada's intense desert temperatures.

"This is the hottest fall we've ever had," she said, referring to how temperatures drifted into the 90s and 100s in late September and October.

Others spoke of concerns for immigrants' rights, health care costs, and gun violence, with one attendee pointing out how the city experienced the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history at the Route 91 Harvest music festival in 2017.

These worries mirror many that the riders have heard across the country, McCulloh said.

"It's what the people really need and want," she said. "It shows people are so in tune with where they live and what their families need."

Many attendees described feeling energized by the event.

"I didn't realize there would be this aspect of participation, but I think that's what really made it," said Eileen Casa, who is in her 50s. "It felt really nice to be able to share openly and honestly with our neighbors."

Advertisement

Tom Gross, 77, felt heartened that fellow city residents could civilly discuss vital issues together.

"All of the issues on this sheet are [top] issues," Gross said, waving an information sheet distributed at the event. "You watch all these ads on TV, and [I'm encouraged] just hearing regular people and their sense of fairness and their sense of compassion for others, without lies and pointing fingers."

Providing meals for community members

Before rolling on to the next city, the bus riders conducted a site visit Oct. 15 to the Las Vegas nonprofit Three Square Food Bank, Southern Nevada's largest hunger relief organization.

The visit included touring the nonprofit's facility, Friedman said, where the bus riders observed volunteers preparing meals to distribute among children and seniors.

"One of the staff commented that [Three Square's] volunteer hours, which are about 50,000 a year, are equivalent to having 25 staff people," Friedman said, adding that the tour's site visits aim to raise awareness of valuable nonprofits and the importance of volunteerism. "I think people want to volunteer for entities that they feel really good about and are doing great work."

The sisters also spoke with Three Square employees about the impact of their work, she said.

"They bring food to libraries so seniors can come, and one of the seniors who had her first meal there said to the staff, 'You made me feel human.' That deeply touched me," Friedman said, lauding that 60% of the nonprofit's food comes from donations. "Another employee told us that a mother said, 'My kids would not have

been able to eat, if not for the meals from here.' "

The tour's riders and staff even volunteered at the food bank as part of the visit, where they packaged bags of produce for 350 families.

"It felt wonderful," Friedman said. "The families that take advantage of this service provided by Three Square have many other needs. We encourage people as we're going along on the bus to think comprehensively about candidates who will be supportive of these multi-issue concerns."

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