


HOW ALL OF US CAN CREATE
HOPE, CHANGE, AND COMMUNITY



A
NUN
ON THE
BUS

Sister Simone Campbell

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Create Hope, Change,
and Community

SISTER SIMONE CAMPBELL, SSS

with DAVID GIBSON



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In gratitude to our "foremothers" who have made this flowering
of opportunity possible: 250+ years of women religious
(nuns and sisters) in the United States,
and more specifically all the people (board, staff, members)
who have made NETWORK what it is today.

CONTENTS



	Preface: "Come, Holy Spirit"	<i>ix</i>
<i>1</i>	California Catholic	1
<i>2</i>	The Quasi Nuns	11
<i>3</i>	Touching the Pain of the World	32
<i>4</i>	Walking Willing: Iraq to Washington	49
<i>5</i>	Health-Care Reform: Divided, Not Conquered	74
<i>6</i>	The Vatican Versus the Nuns	99
<i>7</i>	Road Trip	118
<i>8</i>	Speak, and Fear Not	143
<i>9</i>	Nuns on the Border	160
<i>10</i>	The Road Ahead	179
	Poems for the Journey Ahead	185
	Acknowledgments	199
	Notes	201

PREFACE



“Come, Holy Spirit!”

No one remembers who first said, “Road trip.” But it was immediately clear that going on the road was the way to use our moment of notoriety. I had a map in my head, and I knew we were going on a bus. I knew that it was going to be a “wrapped bus,” because someone said that’s what you do with these sorts of tours. I didn’t know what a wrapped bus was. I was thinking big yellow school bus, of course. That’s the way we sisters travel. Turns out that a wrapped bus is basically a huge wheeled billboard—a bus was plastered in these amazing vinyl decals and presto! There was our message, and our mission, in big letters and bright colors for everyone to see.

That visibility was the whole idea, but we sisters were so new to this game that we still found it all so stunning and wonderful—for the most part. We were planning a twenty-seven-hundred-mile trip across nine states in two weeks to highlight the ongoing suffering of our working poor and middle-class people, struggling to claw and scrape their way out of the stagnant economy.

When the bus rental company personnel told us that we would need a campaign-style bus with just twelve seats plus a bathroom, kitchen area, lounge seating, and storage, we protested.

“But we’re nuns. We’re not used to such luxury,” I told them.

“Trust us, you’re going to be on the bus a long time. You’ll need it,” they said. “But if you want, we can make the outside look trashy.”

Well, we didn’t want trashy. But we did need a name. We needed something to push back against our critics and put out a positive message amid the rancor—to show everyone just what we were doing, and who we were doing it for.

NETWORK was founded in 1972 by forty-seven Catholic sisters on a shoestring budget. They opened a two-person Washington office to lobby for federal policies and legislation that promote economic and social justice, and NETWORK has been pursuing that mission ever since. I was hired as NETWORK’s executive director in 2004, in the midst of the Bush era. By 2012, although President Obama had brought many changes to Washington, the ascendancy of tea party Republicans in the 2010 midterm elections was thwarting efforts to strengthen or even maintain the safety net for poor and working-class Americans just when they needed it most. And proposals to cut taxes for wealthier Americans was only going to worsen an income gap that was close to becoming an unbridgeable chasm.

In April of 2012 at NETWORK, we were marking our fortieth anniversary, and the nagging question at our celebration was a big one: How do we get our message out? How do we let people know that we are doing this work and have been doing it for four decades? That is always a challenge for a small organization like ours, toiling in the trenches on Capitol Hill. But it is also the challenge for those who know that the Gospel has social consequences that must be lived. Our witness, our only media campaign, if you will, is to try to embody this Gospel message vibrantly and with the conviction of apostles fired by the flames of Pentecost.

At that fortieth anniversary party, we could look back with satisfaction at some tremendous gains that came despite fierce resistance. Chief among them was the passage of the health-care reform act two years earlier, in 2010. But now it was the spring of 2012, and we were in the midst of the presidential campaign. The poor and working poor and even the middle class—what was left of it—were thwarted at every turn by an inequitable system that was rigged against them. At the same time, a polarized and paralyzed Washington establishment seemed more interested in scoring political points than in addressing the real needs, the true cry of the people. It was appalling!

So how could we let people know about our organization? How would we get our message out? We came up with a couple small ideas as we brainstormed at the anniversary party: take out a Google ad (because we could not afford a print ad), ask a current NETWORK member to sign up a new member, that sort of thing. Nothing game-changing, as they say in Washington.

But just four days after our celebration, on April 18, 2012, the Vatican answered our question for us: Rome announced, to everyone's surprise, that it was censuring the umbrella group for the leadership of most of the Catholic sisters in the United States, more than fifty thousand of us, because, Vatican leaders said, we promoted "radical feminist themes"—whatever those are. Also, we were supposedly guilty of focusing on social justice concerns at the expense of opposing abortion and gay marriage and other doctrinal priorities for the hierarchy. They even named our little organization as a source of the problem. Well, yes, social justice is what Catholic sisters do. It is what the women religious¹ have done for centuries. It is who we are, especially here in the United States. And it is specifically what NETWORK was founded for, which is apparently the reason the Vatican edict singled us out for a special mention. As if feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and housing the homeless was not orthodox.

As the sages warn, “Be careful for what you pray for!” We wanted to let people know we existed and what we were doing, and we certainly got our wish—though by a route we never expected. American Catholics, and the public generally, reacted to the Vatican censure by expressing heartfelt support for the sisters at every turn. That seems to have surprised the Church’s leadership in Rome. But we had the job of turning this opportunity into a moment for mission. So a month later, on May 14, 2012, we had a planning meeting in our office with a wide range of our colleagues in like-minded secular organizations to try to figure out what exactly to do. There was only one ground rule: this was not about changing the Catholic Church; this was about advancing our mission for economic justice.

Little over an hour later, we knew we were going on the road, and that we were going to be in a wrapped bus. And we were going speak out against the draconian Republican budget championed by Wisconsin congressman Paul Ryan, and we were going to lift up the work of our sisters. What we found so frustrating in Representative Ryan’s proposals was that Catholic sisters so often used and leveraged government funds to create highly effective and accountable social programs. No one was telling that story, or pointing out that these were the very programs that would be devastated by the Ryan budget. That’s the reality that we wanted to communicate, and in the process we wanted to remind our people about the American story of community and solidarity that once defined our society’s ideals.

Squeezed between the Vatican on one side and Capitol Hill on the other, we felt that hitting the road became a no-brainer. We could argue all day or we could go out to the people whose genuine suffering we wanted to make known so that we the people could recognize their plight and together find solutions for the common good.

E-mails flew back and forth over how to brand the bus, and after

much debate I chose what I thought was a straightforward title, and nicely descriptive: “Nuns drive for faith, family, and fairness.”

We liked the phrase “Nuns drive” because we didn’t want something passive, and we didn’t want people talking about “Nuns on the Run,” because that might connote that we were running away. “Nuns drive!” That was strong and indicated a forward-thinking message that we aim to deliver.

So we gave that to our designer to come up with a logo. But she thought it was the tagline, not the headline. Around the NETWORK office we had been referring to the trip among ourselves as the “Nuns on the Bus” tour, a kind of cheeky, in-house reference that was obviously too frivolous to use for the actual event.

Or not. When our communications team passed my longer slogan to our designer, Gene Kim, she assumed the real name was still “Nuns on the Bus.” And that’s what came back: a beautiful logo that read: “Nuns on the Bus: A drive for faith, family, and fairness.”

We knew right away that it was perfect. The Holy Spirit was at work again, and “Nuns on the Bus” was born.

Over the next weeks and months, Nuns on the Bus went viral—a rolling phenomenon that caught the public’s imagination and reflected the anxious mood in our nation, our citizens’ sense that something fundamental was wrong and some fundamental change was needed to set things aright.

The people we met, the stories they told us, were the fuel that drove us onward.

Their stories, those people, were what I brought with me that September when, still more improbably, I found myself on center stage and in a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention. I was given six precious minutes to present our case—our mission—on behalf of a responsible nation that cares for the 100 percent and refuses to let anyone be lost and

forgotten in a society as affluent as ours. “I am my sister’s keeper! I am my brother’s keeper!” I told the rapt crowd and a huge global audience watching on television and via the Internet.

It is a cry that has resonated from the pages of sacred scripture for thousands of years. It is a cry that will echo far into the future. For our brief moment on this earth, we are called to amplify that message, and I have been blessed with a special platform to help in that sacred cause.

“Disbelief” hardly describes how I feel when I look at the path of my life and the eruption of events that have marked my journey in this world over the past couple of years.

The spiritual life has led me to surprising places that are both sacred and awe filled—and at times not a little frightening. At each twist and turn I have been keenly aware—or soon became aware—of the presence of the divine. It has been my long-standing spiritual practice to reflect daily and to try to be aware of what I am being called to, or where I am being led, and what a willing heart should do in response to that call. It isn’t easy, but at the heart of the lived experience, as in all of life, that call, and our response, is a sacred gift.

Religious life has been the adventure that Pope Francis speaks of when he says, “Consecrated (Religious) life is prophecy. God asks us to fly the nest and to be sent to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation to ‘domesticate’ them. This is the most concrete way of imitating the Lord.”² It is living on the edge of the gospel in life that is so alluring to my spirit.

The Nuns on the Bus phenomenon was such a gift of living on the edge. When I think of the journey we have been on, and the road that lies ahead, I am astounded. How amazing that NETWORK’s small role in working for health-care reform in 2010 could lead to the Vatican naming us, our little organization, as such a bad influence on the American nuns. Who could have

thought that trying to use our notoriety for our mission of lifting up the voices of people at the margins of our society would create an explosion of opportunity? I mean, who would have predicted something like the Nuns on the Bus? I didn't.

Needless to say, that all this happened to me, a vowed Catholic sister, is more than a bit astonishing. I can only chalk it up to the work of the Holy Spirit. That's not just a Catholic reflex, or a slogan. I mean it. The core of my being, the most treasured part of my existence, is a contemplative life—a life lived in awareness of the divine. The challenge of maintaining this awareness is to sit openhanded to receive all that comes. It is not possible to hold on to one thought, memory, or idea and continue the contemplative journey. It requires a willingness to live this moment as keenly as possible, always aware of the many dimensions of now. Staying openhanded, treasuring but not grasping, is critical to the contemplative stance.

I also believe that's how we have to think of our economic life together. It's not that everyone needs to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; rather, we all need to be more willing to be open to the new, to giving up some of our stuff, to detachment from things that hold us back—and hold back the development of others.

“Come, Holy Spirit!”

It is my favorite prayer, it is one of the oldest and most traditional Christian invocations, and it is one of the most relevant prayers for our modern age. Today many of us have little faith in our institutions, be they churches or government, and we view ideologies and religions with suspicion. But we sisters trust the Spirit.

“Come, Holy Spirit!”

That is the supplication that starts my day, as I sit on my prayer mat before the makeshift shrine in a corner of my small apartment in southwest Washington. It is the whispered hope that punctuates the rest of my waking and working hours, and the

prayer that is on my lips as I close my eyes at night. It is as my community's foundress, Sister Margaret Sclachta, noted that our special devotion to the Holy Spirit is required because we Sisters of Social Service are placed "in exposed fields and sent on unbroken roads, trusted with the problems of today and tomorrow . . . many times there will be no written guidance, every problem being different; therefore, there will be no repetitions and no trenches in which to hide. The sisters must think very much, still more, understand, and mostly sense (the way forward)."³ "Come Holy Spirit" becomes the anchor of our lives.

It is also the prayer that, in rather grander surroundings, the scarlet-robed cardinals chanted as they processed into the Sistine Chapel in March 2013 to elect a new pope: "Veni, Sancte Spiritus!"

Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest,
and in our souls take up Thy rest;
come with Thy grace and heavenly aid
to fill the hearts which Thou hast made.

One day and several ballots later, the pope whom the cardinals chose emerged onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square, and his election indeed seemed like the fruit of the Spirit: his early focus on the poor was such a boost to so many of us who share his gospel vision. He even took the name of Francis of Assisi, the first pope ever to call himself after the saint of the poor.

"How I would like a church that is poor, and for the poor!" this latter-day Francis said within days of his selection.

But just as heartening for me (even if the enthusiasm of our sisters remains tempered by the challenging experience with the Roman hierarchy) were his repeated invocations of the power of the Holy Spirit—a power so fearsome that it can intimidate the greatest believers: "The Holy Spirit upsets us because it moves us, it makes us walk, it pushes the Church forward," Francis said

at one of his off-the-cuff homilies at morning Mass a month after his election. We want “to calm down the Holy Spirit,” he added. “We want to tame it and this is wrong.”

He’s right. Amen, says this sister to her brother, the pope.

At the same time, I know that I am so often just like everyone else in my resistance to the Spirit, in my fear of being pushed forward. That’s because the Spirit is about change, movement, wind. The Spirit creates change and makes change the only constant. And that is, at times, scary. Throughout my life, as I looked forward into the darkness of the future, I have never known where I was going or where I was being led. Often I have been nervous and insecure about the next step in my life. It has always felt like stepping into the void. But in retrospect, my life seems like a straight line leading from moment to moment. This isn’t how it felt in living it but is how it seems in memory.

The success of the Nuns on the Bus showed me once again, after all these years of praying and meditating, asking for the guidance of the Spirit, that trusting the Spirit is the only way forward. I must let the Spirit change me, and we must let the Spirit change us, all of us. It can happen, it must happen. It is happening. It happened when we fired up that bus that hot and humid June morning in Iowa and went on the road.

“It is a miracle.” That’s my answer anytime I am asked to explain how Nuns on the Bus captured the national moment. And it is a miracle.

But God does not do miracles to show off. Miracles have clear purposes, they are directed toward helping people, toward moving all the people, together, closer to the horizon of justice. Likewise, Jesus shied away from performing any miracles that might be viewed as showy demonstrations, as “magic tricks” aimed at impressing the crowds with his own talents. Every miracle Jesus performed was to help others—to heal, to nourish, to bring others together into a greater understanding of what they could be: he

cured the blind man so that he could see what was truly important, he fed the five thousand so that they could continue to stay together and hear the good news, and he even turned water into wine—his first miracle—so that the wedding party wouldn't be spoiled.

Okay, so in the biblical context, the Nuns on the Bus is a minor miracle. But in this time, this moment, it seems to me to be an important one. It points not to the celebrity of the sisters, but rather to the mission of our lives—to the need to bear each other's suffering, to work together for justice, to build up our wider community. And it points also to the Gospel imperative, the human imperative, I would say, to be a voice crying out against society's abuses and on behalf of those who have been silenced.

What I learned on the bus was that there are heroes all over our country, people who struggle so hard to care for their families. These are the heroes and heroines of our time. These are the ones who we want to celebrate, and support. They are the reason I wrote this book.

One evening in August 2012, I was coming back from New York on the train after taping a television show. I was in Amtrak's quiet car when the conductor came by collecting tickets. She recognized me and she said, really loud, in the quiet car: "You are one of the nuns on the bus! You are on my train!" Before we got to Washington she brought me a ticket stub, a little chit, folded up, and asked me to put it in my prayer book. Well, I don't carry a prayer book. I carry a bible. So I put it in my bible, and later I looked at it more closely. It has her name on it, Eileen, and it says that she was the conductor on our train, on that date, and it asks me to pray for her special intentions. So I keep it in my bible as a memory of Eileen, but I also keep it as a memory of all these lives of good men and women who, day in and day out, work and sacrifice and reclaim in our country the truth of who we are—that we are a country based on community not on individualism. We are a country where we live—and die—for one another.

There are so many who give themselves daily for all of us. One of them I always lift up is Margaret Kistler. Margaret died in Cincinnati because she didn't have access to health care. At the age of fifty-six, after she lost her job—and her health coverage—in the recession, she couldn't afford medical insurance, and she certainly couldn't pay for tests and treatment out of pocket. After many years working for her company as a good and loyal employee, she didn't have a way to get screened for cancer—a simple procedure. So she ended up dying of colon cancer. It is precisely because of Margaret's story, and her struggle, that I am working every day for justice and for better policies for our people. In the richest nation on earth, no more Margarets should die because they don't have access to health care. Margaret inspired me with her commitment to justice for herself and for others, and I want to take that spirit and spread that message to every corner of our society. Every corner.

Our country needs to be for the 100 percent. Our Constitution does not say, "We the citizens . . ." It does not say, "We the rich people . . ." It does not say "We the politicians . . ." or "We the ones who got here first . . ." What our Constitution says is that building our nation is about "We the people . . ."

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America . . .

That's how our foundational document begins: "We the people." All of us, together, need to build our nation.

We are a hungry nation, in every sense of the word. Many are hungry for physical nourishment; all of us are hungry for good

words, and hungry for the knowledge that we are not alone. We are so hungry for community, to know we have each other's back, to know that we are together in this nation. That's what our nation's history teaches us, that is what our faith teaches us.

In this age of hunger I have come to realize that we Nuns on the Bus—and organizations like NETWORK—are like manna, the bread given to the Israelites so that they could survive in the desert. In many ways our nation is wandering in the wilderness. We do not know where we are going, and often we do not even know where we are. We are spinning around in circles in Washington, that's for sure, and it makes me want to weep. We are a nation of problem solvers, yet we are refusing to engage the most critical questions of our time. We have to solve the problems we are facing together or we will lose our democracy. It is that simple.

Yes, we are manna for each other. And you know the thing about manna? You can't hoard it because if you do, it rots. You can read it in the Bible.⁴ So you have to share it every day that it is given. Another thing about manna is that when it is no longer needed, it will disappear. The story of the manna remains, however. For now, there appears a great need for the manna of the bus. It is in this willingness to share that I want to tell you the story.

"Come, Holy Spirit!" Yes, come. And come along with me, for one nun's story, a story that astonishes me as much as anyone.

But come along most of all for what it says about how each of us can be changed, and must be changed. Come along to explore how this change together can transform our society from a dog-eat-dog competition in which only the fittest survive to a genuine community of solidarity and hope. Come along so that together we can feed the people, and thus we the people can form a more perfect union.

"Come, Holy Spirit!"

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