

Oklahoma Teachers Strike

Our faith calls us to work for a just society - one that ensures that every child has an opportunity for a good education and that public schools have the resources necessary to provide such an opportunity. We believe that all children are God's children and deserve the nurture of a good society, the prospect of a good education, and equal opportunity for a good life. Out of that belief, we now offer prayers...
A portion of The Community Litany, prayed at the Oklahoma Capital rotunda

When God calls us beyond the four walls of our church building and into the community, that call can lead a disciple to the seat of government, to speak truth to power. For the Rev. Tracy Evans (Memorial Presbyterian Church in Norman, OK), Rev. Michael East and Rev. Jessica Dixon (First Presbyterian Church in Norman), and Rev. Josh Kerr (First Presbyterian Church in Perry, OK), that call led them to the rotunda of the Oklahoma State Capital building.

Standing side-by-side with clergy from many faith traditions and standing among the Oklahoma teachers who have walked out, prayers were offered on behalf of the teachers, the legislators and, most importantly, the children.

Not unlike many movements of this century, this one started on social media. It was on Facebook that Pastor Evans and many others heard the call.

“There is a Facebook group called ‘Pastors for Oklahoma kids’ and it was an idea created off of a similar Texas group” said Evans. “They posted that there would be a clergy gathering for a time of prayer and for clergy to join in at the capital. I kinda stepped out and thought ‘I’ve been posting right and left about this teacher walk out. I’ve been supporting teachers, but I’ve since learned that the strike is really the teachers are not doing this for themselves... it’s for the students.”

Once she found out about the event and also discovered that other clergy from Indian Nations Presbytery were planning on attending, that led Evans to get onboard and be a part of the event.

“Honestly, it was just showing up... that’s what I really did was to just show up. I don’t know what else I can do. We can throw money at the problem, there’s been a lot of support for food and transportation, but it’s really about encouraging (the teachers) to change the minds of our legislators. A clergy presence could certainly help that” said Evans.

As the prayer time began, the group was positioned in such a way that the primary speakers were facing the rotunda, with the clergy right behind them. Unfortunately, that made it a bit difficult to hear what was going on at times. However, since a video of the proceedings has been posted online, many of the clergy were finally able to clearly hear (and love, according to Evans) the entire program.

<https://www.facebook.com/RussellJonesKOCO/videos/1202415029889147/?fref=mentions>

Following the prayer time, the clergy gathered in a circle on the 4th floor of the rotunda, linked arms with the teachers that were there filling up the capital building and sang “This Little Light of Mine” with some adapted verses that spoke to reason why the teachers were present. For many, that singing together was a very powerful moment.

When the service was ended, the clergy were encouraged to go to the offices of their representatives and express their support of the teachers. Pastors Dixon and Evans tracked down their Norman state senator.

“Not only was he not in his office, but there was no one in his office, which was very discouraging. The office door was unlocked, so we left the liturgy on the administrator’s desk just to say that they had been there,” said Evans.

We pray for our Senators, who have the power of ratification, approving that which moves us toward abundant life for all and disproving anything not aligned with our values. We will continue to remind them that education is infrastructure. We promise to encourage them to make the people of Oklahoma their priority.

After walking among the large numbers of teachers who were standing in line to get into the chambers to watch the proceedings and to set up meetings with their representatives, the clergy went outside to be among the striking teachers and to see the activity that was going on. In that tent city, set up by the teachers, they found schools’ check-in stations, bands and soloists performing and wonderfully creative signs that the participants had made. Additionally, they found there was a group that was continuously walking around the capital.

“There was a sense of encouragement for each other, for the teachers that were there... I was fascinated by the whole thing and I want to get up there again,” said Evans.

We pray for our teachers, that they hold fast to the values they teach their students: perseverance and integrity as they demand what is due them. We pray that they not be discouraged, even though the days out of the classroom accumulate. We promise to support their efforts with our time and substance.

Later that week, a prayer vigil was called, once again on social media. The expectation was that maybe 30 people would attend. The estimates were closer to 500+. That rally of support was encouraging to the clergy and the teachers.

At Memorial Presbyterian Church’s first Sunday service after the walk out began, one of the teachers stood up and informed the congregation that the Norman Public School teachers have been traveling by bus every morning to go to the capital and return later in the day. The cost runs about \$150 per day per bus and there are about 10 buses that make that trip. After this teacher’s appeal, an impromptu collection netted \$155 that was sent to the school district to support a bus going up and back to the capital for one day.

“The folks in my congregation are very connected to the teachers, so there are looking for way to support,” said Evans.

Looking out for children. Calling for justice. Being among the people. Whether it’s a mere presence, taking up a collection or leaving a bulletin on a legislator’s desk, sometimes a disciple is called to speak truth to power

We pray for Oklahoma families, who have had to do some reconfiguring and recalculating during this time. We promise to be good neighbors in tangible ways, to shoulder the burden and lighten the load.

Post script from Pastor Tracy Evans on April 13th: the official walk-out ended yesterday, due to the decision of the primary teacher union. It comes as a great disappointment to the educators

I am hearing from. Yet I am also seeing educators still showing up at the capitol today, as well as parents making plans to show up on Monday and beyond. This is the week for filing to run for state office; there has been a groundswell of candidates apply to run against sitting representatives who have no opponent. The official walk-out may be over, but I believe this is the beginning of a movement of support for our children, and their right to have adequate funding for their future. May it be so.