

## **Report on the International Peacemaker Visit to the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, Sept. 27 through Oct. 2, 2023.**

International Peacemaker Gaia Magdalena Łuczak arrived in Columbus, OH, on Wed., Sept. 27, 2023, was picked up there by the Rev. Cynthia Holder Rich and driven to Dayton to the home of her housing hosts, Susie and Paul Weaver of Westminster PC. Over the next four days, Gaia Magdalena presented many times at several venues around the Presbytery of the Miami Valley. Following is a brief summary of those events.

### **Springfield, OH, September 28th**

The organizing team in Springfield—Pastor Jody Noble and Tyra Jackson—arranged a remarkable day on Thursday, beginning with a delightful, energizing time with eleven 3-5 year olds at Covenant Presbyterian Church’s Children’s Academy; then a succession of nearly hour-long presentations to 14 International Baccalaureate students at Springfield High School; to 14 psychology and political science students at Wittenberg University; and after a delicious vegan dinner, to 22 attentive church folks from various faith communities in the presbytery at

#### **Springfield: Covenant Church.**

Gaia Magdalena’s focus was tailored to each audience and all the groups seemed engaged, asking perceptive questions. She incorporated both her own remarkable personal experiences in the forest and the broader context that makes vulnerable people susceptible to manipulation and exploitation. Perhaps the most rewarding moment of the day was the seven Springfield High School students who gathered around her after her formal presentation to ask questions about how, after hearing her personal story, they too could embody a sense of a purposeful life in a society that does not always value young people seeking those ideals.

### **Belle Center, OH, September 29th**

On Friday, Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>, Gaia Magdalena presented at **Belle Center United Presbyterian Church** to a gathered group of twelve people representing three congregations. The visit was coordinated by Rev. Ted Dennis, pastor of Belle Center United Presbyterian Church. Four women of the church prepared a delicious

potato and salad bar with lots of vegan options (vegan butter and sour cream included!), sweets and beverages. Gaia Magdalena shared her presentation with the group, answering questions as they were asked and outlining ways that attendees who wanted to take some action or provide support could do so.

### **West Chester, OH, September 30th**

On Saturday, Sept. 30<sup>th</sup>, 15 members of Presbytery of the Miami Valley congregations joined Gaia Magdalena in a visit to the **Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati**. We toured the worship space and met with social services staff. The ICGC offers services to refugees, immigrants, and other community members, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Social services staff members shared with us their sense of how work with refugees had changed over the last number of years, with political decisions and changes in administrations having significant impact on the identity and number of refugees and immigrants needing services. The ICGC works with families new to the community and families in need to work toward the provision of housing, transportation, education, food support, language training, and job training. They shared also about the need for mental health services. We heard that families who have sponsors do much better than those who do not. Gaia Magdalena shared that many of the programs and many of the needs staff members described are like the needs she sees on the Poland-Belarus border.

### **Oxford, OH, September 30th**

On Saturday, Sept. 30<sup>th</sup>, Gaia Magdalena was present in Oxford, Ohio. During the afternoon, she met with Pastor Lawrence Bartel, Elder John Bailer and a journalism professor from Miami University who has been working on tracking migrants from Middle Eastern countries since 2020. At 5:00, a group of approximately 20 people gathered at the Seminary Building of **Oxford Presbyterian Church** for a buffet of sandwiches, salads, sides, desserts and drinks. This group included the Mission Chair from the church, and five Masters/PhD students currently studying at Miami University who are from Ghana.

Rev. Laurence Bartel opened the gathering with a brief worship liturgy. Gaia Magdalena shared her presentation with the group, answering their questions. The gathering was closed with a brief worship liturgy.

### **Dayton, OH, October 1st**

Gaia Magdalena presented during Sunday morning worship at **Corinth Presbyterian Church** in Dayton. Worship was followed by a community meal, where Gaia continued to present and fielded many questions. Participants asked questions about Gaia Magdalena's work, how she got into this work, and how Christians in the US could help. Gaia Magdalena shared that there are refugee crises closer than Poland, even on the US border, to which Christians in the US could turn their attention. Members who had attended the visit to the ICGC inquired about the possibility of the congregation becoming a sponsor, perhaps with other congregations, for refugee families coming to our area. Mission Committee members shared that the information they had heard would be discussed at their next meeting.

### **Bellbrook, OH, October 1st**

On Sunday evening, Oct. 1, twenty people, representing eight congregations and the leadership of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, met for dinner and a strategic planning session at **The Bellbrook Presbyterian Church**. International Peacemaker from Poland, Gaia Magdalena Luczak, recapped the presentation she had given at several sites around the Miami Valley for those who had been unable to attend previous meetings. Following a delicious vegan dinner prepared by Dennis McNulty, Ed McNulty, and the Rev. Diane Ziegler, the evening's program focused on "What Next?"

Attendees gathered around five tables, with each group tasked with brainstorming about one of five topics provided by Gaia, suggesting ways we could help refugees and immigrants in the Miami Valley: Education, Health, Food, Play, and Help. The conversations were lively and produced a shower of post-it-notes that were attached to a white board at the front of the room as each table reported the highlights of their conversation.

Participants were also asked to write on colorful index cards statements of insights, impressions, and encouragement after hearing Gaia Magdalena's presentation, either that night or earlier in her visit. These were given to Gaia to take with her as encouragement in the work that she does. Some of the comments included: "We hear so much about refugees as a group, but you helped to humanize them and to see them as individuals." "There but for the grace of God go I." "I will not forget some of the stories you have told." "Thank you for the work you are doing. You are Christ's hands, feet, and heart." "This has been life changing!" "Indifference is no longer an option!"

The Rev. Cynthia Holder Rich thanked the team that planned Gaia Magdalena's visit and reminded people of how often we all have been part of a moving experience but then there has been no follow-up. We don't want that to happen this time. We as Presbyterian Christians are well placed to make our voices heard for healing in our society.

The Rev. Julia Williamson and Harry Hopkins of Faith PC in Huber Heights volunteered to call a meeting to plan next steps. Gaia Magdalena was pleased and encouraged by the enthusiasm in the room, and said that she felt she had made a difference during her time with us. She expressed concern for the upcoming (Oct. 15) national elections in Poland, because if the ruling party remains in power, the situation for refugees will worsen, and she and other human rights workers will be in danger. She reminded us that she is not on a fundraising mission, but that if we want to help financially, we should do it through PCUSA. She encouraged us to view the film *The Green Border*, which won a prize at the Toronto Film Festival. The screenwriter and lead actress have been with her in the forests on the Polish/Belarus border. We will try to bring it to the Neon in Dayton.

The meeting was closed with a prayer circle led by the Rev. Terry Kukuk, in which we prayed for Gaia Magdalena's safety; for the ongoing work of her human rights organization, Grupa Granica; for refugees at the Polish border and at our own; for displaced persons all over the world; thanks for the inspiration this Peacemaker visit has brought to us; and a petition for the energy and courage to move forward.