

UPC Social Witness Committee

Final Report and Recommendations on Immigration

Presented to UPC Session July 19, 2017

The Social Witness Committee is a new sessional committee of UPC created in the fall of 2016. The purpose of the Social Witness Committee is to awaken the theological conscience of the members of UPC by exploring tough societal topics and issues through the lens of our Christian faith and considering how we are called to respond to these issues as individuals and as a community of faith. For its inaugural topic, the Committee decided to pursue the issue of immigration.

Studying the Topic of Immigration

The first official meeting of the Committee was held on Thursday, October 13, 2016 and, since that time, the Committee has continued to meet on the first Thursday of every month. The Committee began its work by exploring the topic of immigration and researching specific aspects, such as PCUSA's work in the arena, local efforts, information about what it means to be a "sanctuary church," and information about different types of immigration. The Committee drew on the independent research of its members and also invited guest experts to its meetings to share their expertise.

Sharing information with the Congregation

In partnership with the Faith and Life Class, the Committee held an Immigration Speaker Series during the Sunday class hour on February 12, 19 and 26, 2017. The first session was an introduction to the topic of immigration and its intersection with our Christian faith, which was led by UPC member, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary professor, and immigrant Margaret Aymer Oget. The February 19th session focused on refugees, presented by Merinda Cutler from Texas Refugee Services of Austin, and the February 26th session focused on asylum seekers with UPC San Antonio member Lenna Baxter, who participates in that community's Interfaith Welcoming Committee. In addition to the speaker series, Committee member Sarah French hosted an information/discussion session for the UPC Young Adults in her home with a discussion led by Krystal Leedy.

Conversation on Immigration with members of UPC

On May 7, 2017, the Committee hosted a Conversation on Immigration after church in the Great Hall. After opening remarks by Daniel Brinks, Associate Professor of Government and Co-Director of the Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at UT, Committee member Bee Moorehead led a panel discussion with Brinks and Krystal Leedy about various ways churches and individuals can take action in response to immigration issues. A full hour was then spent in table discussions

Committee members:

David Berkman
Suzanna Caballero
Robin Dennis
Mary Dodd
Jon Eddison
Sarah French
Eve Lawrence
Krystal Leedy
Shannon Middleton
Bee Moorehead
Roscoe Overton
David Perry
Bobbie Sanders
Marvin Wofford

facilitated by members of the Social Witness Committee. Approximately 70 people participated in the discussion.

The Basis for the Committee's Recommendations

1. Scriptural

From Genesis through the New Testament, the people of God have been commanded to respect and care for the “stranger within your midst.” Jesus taught love of neighbor, especially the neighbor in need, is second only to our love of God. See Attachment A, “The Bible and Immigration,” for a listing of those scriptures which help illustrate how our faith story is a story told through the experiences of immigrants, exiles and refugees.

2. Denominational

The 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted four resolutions “Reaffirming the Ministry of Sanctuary by Congregations.” (See Attachment B.) This document and others from PCUSA’s Office of Immigration Issues provide guidelines for congregations in developing their own resolutions. These documents affirm that our responsibility to immigrants may extend to:

- families, parents, children, unaccompanied minors, and adults
- refugees and seekers of asylum
- those confined in inhumane conditions while awaiting decisions on their cases
- those threatened with deportation without due process of law

3. Ecumenical/Faith-Based

The issues concerning immigration in Austin have been addressed through the years by a number of churches and agencies. These include iACT (Interfaith Action Central Texas) and Texas Impact which bring together leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and other faiths to explore together how we can deepen our own faith by working with people of other faiths toward common social interests. The Social Witness Committee has drawn on the expertise and experience of these organizations in formulating the Committee’s recommendations.

4. Congregational

There was significant interest and participation in the Faith and Life class series on immigration and in the May 7th Conversation on Immigration. Written evaluations completed by UPC members at the May 7th Conversation on Immigration revealed that 78% were “very likely” to support UPC action to help immigrants and 61% were “very likely” to take individual action. Strong support was voiced for serving as a “Welcoming Team” for refugee families. There was also support for working within the PCUSA, Mission Presbytery, and other faith-based organizations to advocate for immigrants and to minister to their needs. The congregation seems ready for further leadership regarding this issue.

Specific Recommendations

The Social Witness committee moves that the session of UPC adopt the following policies after receiving the Final Report and Recommendations on Immigration.

Policies

1. Affirm to the congregation UPC's support of the 222nd General Assembly's "Resolution Reaffirming the Ministry of Sanctuary by Congregations."
2. Be intentional about working with Mission Presbytery and with other churches and faith-based groups on the issue of immigration and other societal issues.
3. Preach and teach UPC's commitment to helping immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

The committee also recommends the following potential actions as consequences of these policies.

Potential Actions

1. Agree to the process of becoming a "Welcoming Team" for refugee families assigned to Austin by the U.S. Department of State refugee program if and when this proposal is submitted by the Service Committee.
2. Encourage UPC members to consider being part of a Hutto Visitation Team to visit asylum seekers at the Taylor detention center.
3. Encourage ministries operating on UPC property, such as Micah 6 and UPLift, to invite their participants to que up for services in "private" UPC areas with a gate, such as the north courtyard, and not in open or public areas such as the sidewalk, where they are more subject to questioning regarding immigration status.
4. Develop and add to its Policies and Procedures specific protocols for responding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) warrants, and ensure that UPC staff and volunteers are familiar with "Know Your Rights" materials so that they fully understand the rights of our church, its members and its guests in this regard.
5. Communicate with the congregation about the church's involvement in immigration through a bulletin board outside the church office for posting information and events and by electronically publishing this report and future actions on immigration undertaken by the church.

In seeking to follow the example of Christ, and in keeping with the spirit of our denomination's stand on immigration, the Social Witness Committee affirms the intention always to act non-violently, peacefully, and lovingly in spirit, word, and deed.

Respectfully submitted, July 19, 2017 by

The Social Witness Committee of University Presbyterian Church

Chairperson, Mary Dodd

Incoming Chairperson, Marvin Wofford