



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Witnessing for Immigration Justice at Whipple Federal Building *by Rev. Dr. Charles Wolfe*

On the second Tuesday of every month for more than a year, the Bishop Henry Whipple* Federal Building, has been the site of a gathering to pray, sing and bear witness to the multitude of injustices in the Immigration policies of our country. Organized and hosted by the Interfaith Coalition on Immigration (ICOM)** centered in Minneapolis-St. Paul, a gathering of between sixty and eighty people—Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and others, arrive for the 7:30 a.m. hour long event. In the warmth of morning sun, in the cold of winter storms, or in the midst of rain this cadre carrying signs of protest--wearing business suits, casual dress, or clerical garb-- they come to bear witness to their convictions.



Since spring of this year, most of those Tuesdays, I have joined my sisters and brothers for these vigils after I learned that the Bishop Henry Whipple building is where immigration cases are adjudicated, not only for Minnesota residents, but also for immigrants from South Dakota, portions of Iowa, and most of Wisconsin. As a member of the Wisconsin Conference Immigration Task Force, it seemed to me that our Immigrant Welcoming Conference should have a presence at that witness! Having retired to Prescott, Wisconsin, in 2011 after many years serving Plymouth UCC in Madison in 2011, the Whipple building is only a twenty minute drive from my home...even in rush hour traffic. Inevitably, my attendance has been both inspiring for me, and educational. I have heard stories about particular families who have been caught up in the dragnet of ICE; I have heard stories from immigrants who have had family members deported, or been themselves threatened with deportation, and I have heard the stories from lawyers who, often with little or no compensation, represent immigrants.

Gatherings begin at the landscaped flagpole a hundred feet outside the main entrance to the Henry Whipple building where later, at 9:00 each morning, immigrants—refugees—who have been detained by ICE and threatened with deportation, are brought before a judge. Most of

them wear the orange jumpsuits they have been issued, and come with wrist manacles, and sometimes leg shackles as well. Those who have obtained a lawyer often appear for only a few minutes as their lawyer asks for a continuance, so that adequate time to understand the clients' situation can be had. Once in while a ruling is made to either release the person who has been brought to court, or to allow them to be deported back to their country of origin, where often the life-threatening violence that drove them to flee to the United States awaits them.



When the policy of removing children from their parents after apprehension at the border began to be enforced, attendees could drive to the parking booth outside the Federal building and park in the visitor parking area to attend the witness events at the flagpole. When some members of ICOM chose to protest the abusive policy of family separation with civil disobedience, and stood on the tracks of the rapid transit system serving the Whipple building, the parking policy changed, and protesters must now park several blocks away in Park and Ride lots serving the transit system station. ICE reportedly told leaders that after civil disobedience was used, they are more "nervous" about ICOM protests, and need "tighter control."

ICOM, in addition to hosting monthly gatherings to bear public witness, also serves as a networking organization to provide information and support to immigrants. Resources range from assistance in finding legal help, to providing help with housing, food, and meeting other basic needs, and identifying possible sanctuary sites. There are continuing meetings of task forces of ICOM seeking to provide the help most needed in the continually changing vortex of the refugee crisis in our world. Not least it also means providing accompaniment to refugees, including a dozen or so individuals who, at the end of each 7:30 a.m. gathering, enter the Whipple building to pass through the rigid security stations, and to sit in courtrooms to observe the legal process, and to be a warm, compassionate, face in what is obviously an anxiety-producing situation for those whose presence in our country has been challenged.

My participation has seemed small, almost insignificant...and yet, it is something...a small way in which some energy, some part of my being, some effort can be made...which I can do to bear witness to my own convictions that our nation and our society has become too closed to compassion, too isolated from the common good of humanity, too much drawn into ourselves. And so I will continue to set my alarm early on the second Tuesdays each month, and bear witness. I invite others who are able to join me in these vigils. It is a small thing, but it is something.

* Ironically, the Bishop Henry Whipple building honors Henry Whipple, first Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota (born in New York, 1822, attended Oberlin College, 1838-9), who came to

Minnesota from a parish in Chicago where he gained a reputation for service to poor immigrant groups. Called to Minnesota in 1859, he served as bishop until his death in 1901. He was greatly concerned for, and critical of unfair treatment by the Federal Government of Minnesota Indians, and is credited with influencing President Lincoln's sparing many of those sentenced to be hanged after the Sioux uprising of 1862. Whipple's sense of justice earned him the enmity of many whites in Minnesota as well as many of his fellow bishops!

** To access the website for ICOM, google "Interfaith Coalition on Immigration (ICOM)"

Rev. Dr. Charles Wolfe, retired, serves on the Conference Immigration Task Force, and, beginning in 1987, for many years chaired the Conference's Guatemalan Refugee Ministry Committee (GRAM), working with the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico.

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