

Could MPUUC Sponsor an Asylum Seeker?

Many of us feel helpless right now about the situation at the border: family separation, children in concentration camps, there seems to be no end to the cruelty. We donate to immigration lawyers, and that makes a real difference, but there's only so much they can do. In the coming weeks and months, we are going to see if we can do something more as a congregation. One possibility is sponsoring an asylum seeker. Over the past weeks, I've been researching what that would entail, and I'll give a short pulpitorial this Sunday to share what I've learned. If you can't make it on Sunday, you can read what I have to say here.

A refugee is defined as someone who flees persecution in their home country "on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion". While some apply for refugee status outside the host country, asylum seekers apply from within the host country or at the border. In the United States, after an asylum seeker presents themselves, they are taken to a detention center, where they are held until their asylum hearing, which typically takes months or years. However, if the asylum seeker has a sponsor -- someone who can provide housing and financial support -- they are considered less of a flight risk and may be released from detention to that sponsor. While some asylum seekers have family members in the U.S. who can serve as sponsors, others rely on strangers to step up to the task.

Getting out of detention into the free world is a good thing in and of itself. But some particularly important benefits include better access to legal services, which dramatically increase the chance of being granted asylum, the ability to get a job to pay a lawyer and in some cases to support family back home, and better access to medical care. Asylum seekers who were separated from their children at the border can better fight to be reunited with their children from outside detention. The part of the country to which an asylum seeker is released has a huge impact on their chances of being granted asylum. In Alabama, 2% of asylum cases are granted. In San Francisco, it's 97%! Sponsoring an asylum seeker in the Bay Area basically guarantees that they will be granted asylum!

After the Vietnam War, the U.S. government asked churches, synagogues, and temples across the country to sponsor asylum seekers to help welcome them into the U.S. This is a sharp contrast to today's administration, which is holding asylum seekers in for-profit detention centers and posting higher and higher bail to prevent them from getting out. Nonetheless, congregations across the country are stepping up to form sponsorship and accompaniment teams. The sponsor must be a single individual -- a U.S. citizen or permanent resident who can demonstrate to ICE that they have housing and income to support the asylum seeker until they can get a work permit, which can take six months to a year. But sponsors seldom act alone. Congregations work to form an accompaniment team, typically 5-7 core individuals plus other less frequent volunteers who work to support the asylum seeker and the sponsor.

When the asylum seeker is first released from detention, there's lots of work to do. The accompaniment team helps to connect the asylum seeker with local services, everything from legal support and medical care to English lessons and social activities. The accompaniment team also provides moral support by joining the asylum seeker at court dates and ICE check-ins. At least until the asylum seeker gets a work permit, the whole congregation gets involved in fundraising. There are many nonprofit organizations and government agencies that provide free

or discounted services to asylum seekers, including legal services, health care (in Alameda County, asylum seekers qualify for MediCal), and bail funds.

It's a lot of work to navigate these services and associated bureaucracy. But we won't do it alone. I've been in contact with local organizations including IM4HI (<http://www.im4humanintegrity.org/northern-california-immigration/>), EBSC (<https://eastbaysanctuary.org/>), and other congregations that have sponsored asylum seekers (<http://kehillasynagogue.org/immigration-committee/>), and they will support our congregation if we step up. If you want to learn more, this is an excellent article about the process of sponsoring an asylum seeker, focusing on the needs of trans women who flee their home countries: <https://bit.ly/2XJeLNx>.

Is MPUUC up to the task of sponsorship and accompaniment? The Social Justice Council thinks we should spend the summer figuring this out. Throughout the summer, starting this coming Sunday, I'll set up a table after church with reading materials and comment cards. We want to hear your thoughts! Do you want to learn more about being a sponsor? Would you want to be part of an accompaniment team? Would you be able to support an asylum seeker and their sponsor financially? Do you have concerns that this project is too big for MPUUC or feel we should focus our energy elsewhere? We want to hear from you! If you won't be at the service, you can email me (allie.king@gmail.com) with your thoughts.