

A few months ago, I set out to learn what we could do as a congregation in response to the atrocities being committed by our government at the border. I was particularly outraged about family separation. I sought out local organizations that were making a difference, and I ended up at a SURJ (Showing up for Racial Justice) meeting at Kahilla Community Synagogue in Berkeley. Members of the synagogue spoke about hosting asylum seekers in their homes, and they explained how their congregation formed accompaniment teams to provide support to the asylum seekers and their sponsors.

A trans woman, who fled Honduras because a gang there told her they'd kill her if she refused to smuggle drugs for them, spoke to us about her experience seeking asylum in the United States. I apologize I don't recall her name. She was using a pseudonym because she's still afraid for her life. Trans women are disproportionately targeted by gangs in Central America. This woman had been held with other LGBTQ asylum seekers in the "ice box", a short-term detention center where asylum seekers wait at the border to be transferred to longer term detention facilities within the United States. It's called the "ice box" because cells are kept at low temperatures, and detainees are given only aluminum blankets. Another trans woman held in her cell was very sick and the guards didn't provide any help to her. She later died due to complications of AIDS and her mistreatment in detention. After sharing with us her harrowing experiences in detention, the speaker talked about her gratitude to her host family, who had helped her get out of long-term detention and onto her feet in the United States.

An asylum seeker is someone who flees persecution in their home country "on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion". Asylum seekers who present themselves at official ports of entry to the United States are sent to detention centers within the interior of the country where they wait for their hearing in immigration court. This can take months or years because there's a huge back-log. 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 increases the chance of being granted asylum, the ability to get a job, 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%!

So what is a sponsor? 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 an 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 accompaniment teams, typically 5-7 core individuals plus other less frequent volunteers who work to support the asylum seeker and the sponsor.

When an asylum seeker is first released from detention, there's lots of work to do. The accompaniment team helps to connect them with local services, everything from legal support and medical care to English lessons and social activities. If the congregation sponsors a family, they can help sign the kids up for school and get them connected to services for any special needs. 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 local nonprofit organizations and government agencies that provide free or discounted services to asylum seekers, including legal services, bail funds, and health care -- in Alameda county, asylum seekers qualify for Medi-Cal.

I do want to note that not all asylum seekers are detained. If someone enters the United States, either with a visa or by crossing the border undetected, they can apply for asylum from within the country. This approach is called “affirmative asylum”, whereas the process I first described is called “defensive asylum”. I want to emphasize that seeking asylum either affirmatively or defensively is completely legal under both international and U.S. law, even in the case where someone crosses the border undetected in order to petition for asylum. Instead of going through immigration courts, affirmative asylum seekers are evaluated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Just like the defensive asylum process, this can take months or years. If it takes more than five months, the affirmative asylum seeker can apply for a work permit. If USCIS determines they don't qualify for asylum, they can apply for "defensive asylum" at that point, and then they enter the immigration court system. People seeking affirmative asylum are often also in great need, and congregations form accompaniment teams to help them as well. The difference is they don't need an official sponsor to register with ICE.

Is Mission Peak up to the task of sponsorship and accompaniment? The Board thinks we should spend the summer figuring this out. We'll have representatives of local organizations come to speak with us about the process of sponsorship and accompaniment in August and September. 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 our congregation or feel we should focus our energy elsewhere? We want to hear from you! Please come to my table and fill out a comment card after the service!