

Resistance and Solidarity: Sanctuary Congregations in an Era of Mass Deportation

At this extraordinary time in our nation's history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion, to truth and the core values of American society. In the face of looming threats to immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and the LGBTQ community and the rise of hate speech, harassment and hate crimes, we affirm our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil. As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

-- Declaration of Conscience, joint statement of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, January 2017

Introduction

For decades, immigration has been a contentious issue in the United States. During the U.S. presidential campaign of 2016, the political discourse changed in troubling ways. In the heated language used by Donald Trump, the focus shifted from arguments about *immigration reform* to attacks on *immigrants themselves*. Whether speaking of Muslim refugees from Syria or Mexican migrants seeking a better life, campaign rhetoric generated fearful images of lawlessness caused by these “others” who do not belong.

We now face four years of a Trump administration as President Trump moves to deliver on what he promised during his campaign: to further militarize our borders; restrict or eliminate immigration by Muslims; deport 11 million undocumented people, regardless of their age, family situation, or community roots; and punish cities or states that refuse to cooperate with immigration enforcement. And while much of the political dialogue around immigration has focused on residency and citizenship status, in fact the oppressive political climate also influences the rise of Islamophobia, inflicts ever harsher realities on lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender and queer identified (LGBTQ) persons, and reflects the broader trends towards the criminalization of people of color in the United States.

Faith communities are mobilizing, and many Unitarian Universalists are among them. In the face of practices that diminish other human beings, we assert the equal worth and dignity of all. As hate crimes increase, we will resist racism and bigotry in all their forms and do what we can to help those most at risk. As immigration policies and the wider system of enforcement tear families apart, we will do what we can to stop them, answering the higher call of love for our neighbors.

We claim the language of “sanctuary” as the way we create safe systems for those under threat because of their status, religion, race or identity. This toolkit was written as a roadmap for Unitarian Universalist congregations who want to offer one form of sanctuary, which is physical shelter for individuals under immediate threat of deportation. The toolkit will touch on other ways to provide sanctuary, such as advocating for sanctuary city policies or investing in community protection networks, and readers are encouraged to visit uua.org/declaration to learn more about those avenues of religious witness and action.

This toolkit was originally created by congregations and coalitions that make up the Sanctuary Movement. It was revised and updated by the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice (UUCSJ) and UU Refugee and Immigrant Services and Education (UURISE). We hope it will inspire and support you and your community to resist bias and injustice, protect those most at risk, and live out of our core religious values.

What is Sanctuary?

Sanctuary is a way to be in solidarity with the undocumented community by creating safe spaces for the prophetic voices of immigrant leaders to be lifted up as we together confront unjust laws. Through the Sanctuary Movement, faith communities can powerfully enact and embody their commitment to justice. A church that declares itself a Sanctuary congregation is one willing to engage on a spectrum of solidarity actions including welcoming undocumented people, advocating to help stop deportations, assisting with legal clinics, and physically sheltering an immigrant in danger of immediate deportation.

Sanctuary is one way for faith communities to resist destructive and racially charged policies. Grounded in our core religious truths that celebrate diversity, advocate for racial justice, and honor the dignity of each person, we help create the world we envision.

PRAYER FOR TRAVELERS, BY REV. ANGELA HERRERA

(First UU Church Albuquerque, NM)

This is a prayer for all the travelers.
For the ones who start out in beauty,
who fall from grace,
who step gingerly,
looking for the way back.
And for those who are born into the margins,
who travel from one liminal space to
another,
crossing boundaries in search of center.
This is a prayer for the ones whose births
are a passing from darkness to darkness,
who all their lives are drawn toward the light,
and keep moving,
and for those whose journeys
are a winding road that begins
and ends in the same place,
though only when the journey is completed
do they finally know where they are.

For all the travelers, young and old,
aching and joyful,
weary and full of life;
the ones who are here, and the ones who
are not here;
the ones who are like you (and they're all
like you)
and the ones who are different (for in some
ways, we each travel alone).

This is a prayer for traveling mercies,
And sure-footedness,
for clear vision,
for bread
for your body and spirit,
for water,
for your safe arrival
and for everyone you see along the way.

A Short History of Sanctuary

The original concept of religious spaces as sanctuary for refugees is rooted in Judaism. The ancient Hebrew people allowed temples and even whole cities to declare themselves places of refuge for persons accused of a crime which they may not have committed. This practice allowed those wrongfully accused to escape swift and harsh retribution until they could receive a fair trial. In the late Roman Empire, fugitives sometimes found refuge in Christian churches. Later, during the medieval period, the English common law permitted an accused felon to seek sanctuary in a church, and then choose either to submit to trial or to confess and leave the country.

In the United States, the first practical case of anything like sanctuary occurred in the years before the Civil War, when slaves fleeing through the Underground Railroad found safety along the way in churches and private homes throughout the country. Another example occurred during the Vietnam War, when some churches opened their doors to young men resisting the draft. This gave temporary refuge to the resistor, and allowed the congregations to amplify their religious message against war.

In the 1980s, refugees from military oppression and civil wars in Central America began to flee to the United States. The U.S. government did not recognize them as political refugees, even though many were threatened by death squads in their home countries. The Sanctuary Movement was born in response, first established at the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ. At its strongest, the movement included over 500 congregations that collaborated to move refugees through the United States to safe houses and safe congregations.

The Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s reminded the United States government that it was not following its own asylum and refugee laws for the refugees of Central America. Some clergy members in Arizona and elsewhere were charged with felonies for their involvement in offering Sanctuary. The movement declared victory when the U.S. government awarded refugee status and legal asylum to those fleeing violence in Central America.

Several decades later, beginning in 2007, the New Sanctuary Movement took shape among coalitions of congregations in cities throughout the country. As immigration raids in neighborhoods and work places escalated in a climate of political paralysis for immigration reform, these congregations opened their doors to provide refuge to those facing deportation.

The New Sanctuary Movement helped win prosecutorial discretion through the Morton memo in 2011¹ and President Obama's Executive Actions on Immigration in 2014,² along with local and state ordinances restricting police collaboration with immigration enforcement. Together, these policies helped stop thousands of deportations through case-by-case advocacy. However, under the administration of President Trump, the future of these policies is uncertain; they may be rolled back, following the President's early executive orders to radically increase the number of deportations for current undocumented immigrants and prevent further entry for the tens of thousands of refugees fleeing violence in their own countries.

UU involvement in sanctuary

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) were both deeply involved in supporting the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. In 1980, 1984 and 1985, the UUA General Assembly passed resolutions supporting sanctuary and refugee rights, and numerous Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations offered or supported Sanctuary. The UUA Board of Trustees honored congregations providing sanctuary and created a fund to support individuals seeking sanctuary and churches that were providing it. The UUSC acted within coalitions to connect those seeking sanctuary with congregations willing to offer it and led numerous advocacy initiatives to mobilize Unitarian Universalists to press Congress for change. The UUSC also sponsored Congressional delegations to Central America, so those lawmakers could witness the political situations in El Salvador and Guatemala first hand.

In May 2007, the UUA became the first national religious denomination to endorse the New Sanctuary Movement, grounding this support in UU history with the original Sanctuary Movement, our sources and principles, and prior statements by the UUA General Assembly regarding immigration. These statements strongly condemn the current immigration system, support immigration reform, and encourage support for immigrants, regardless of immigration status. In 2013, the General Assembly passed a Statement of Conscience titled "Immigration as a Moral Issue."³ In January 2017, the UUA and UUSC together issued a new Declaration of Conscience denouncing the first Executive Orders from the Trump administration and calling on our faith communities to translate our values into active resistance.⁴

¹ June 2011 memorandum from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Director John Morton: <http://www.ice.gov/doclib/secure-communities/pdf/prosecutorial-discretion-memo.pdf>

² 2014 Executive Actions on Immigration resource page: <http://www.uscis.gov/immigrationaction>

³ Immigration as a Moral Issue – Statement of Conscience:
<http://www.uua.org/statements/immigration-moral-issue>

⁴ Sign the Declaration of Conscience at <http://www.uua.org/declaration>

UURISE has been an active part of the New Sanctuary Movement since its inception in 2007. It provides consultations, support and technical assistance to UU and other liberal religious congregations in the discernment and provision of sanctuary. The UU College of Social Justice offers immersion learning programs at the Arizona/Mexico border, a wide array of education and action resources, and justice training programs focused on immigration as well as other issues.

Sanctuary and resistance in the era of President Trump

In the United States, immigration is addressed and controlled at the federal level. Though state and local governments can influence the American immigration system through enforcement and cooperation, it is federal leaders whose decisions have the widest impact in the system. With the inauguration of Donald Trump as President in January 2017, we are entering uncharted political territory. In addition to the President himself, senior administration leaders, including Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, have been vocal in their intent to reverse many Obama era policies and step-up a hardline approach to immigration enforcement.

The first weeks of the Trump administration set in motion some ominous changes. They offer a clear indication of the administration's intention to:

- Hold all undocumented migrants in detention until they can be deported (including women, children, and men convicted of no crimes);
- Build "an impenetrable physical wall on the southern border"; since a border wall already exists along much of this border, this implies further militarization;
- Pressure local and state police to enforce federal immigration actions;
- Punish institutions, cities, and states that declare forms of sanctuary by withholding federal funds;
- Treat Muslims and immigrants from Muslim countries with specific suspicion and further restrict their ability to enter the country;
- Vastly expand the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents;
- Suspend visas for immigrants from designated countries with Muslim majorities, regardless of refugee status under international law; and
- Punish employers who hire undocumented immigrants.

Throughout his campaign, Trump used language declaring entire populations of people by race, religion and national origin to be criminal or suspect. The immediate uptick in hate speech and assaults around the country in the wake of Trump's election demonstrates the ways such language emboldens advocates of white supremacy and other hate groups.

As people of faith, we are called to accompany our community members, congregants and neighbors facing deportation. Offering physical sanctuary, or helping another group to offer sanctuary, is one way to help individuals who face this threat.

An offer of physical sanctuary is a way to fight individual cases, advocate to stop deportations, and keep families together. It is a powerful witness to justice and a concrete way in which to live out our faith. But it is a decision that requires thorough preparation and a clear discernment process by the host congregation, in close collaboration with local migrant rights organizations. It also requires great dedication on the part of any person entering as a sanctuary guest, since for them the experience is tantamount to house arrest: they cannot leave the campus of the church for any reason until their immigration case has been decided without risking arrest.

The Sanctuary Movement has grown and flourished because of the courageous leadership and fierce drive of the undocumented people who have put themselves and their freedom on the line. Their voices, wishes, opinions and leadership should be prioritized and respected throughout the process. Through providing or supporting sanctuary, we are doing this important work *with* them, not *for* them.

Again, the offer of physical sanctuary is just one form of action toward immigration justice: there are many other ways for your congregation to enact our religious values and stand in solidarity with migrants! If your community is unable to offer physical sanctuary, you can still become a support congregation to another church, and engage in vigorous advocacy for immigration justice.

Specific goals of the current Sanctuary Movement include the following:

- Accompany our community members, congregants and neighbors facing deportation through joining the Sanctuary Movement and working to stop deportations case-by-case, and by advocating to stop unjust deportation policies;

- Amplify the moral imperative to stop deportations by lifting up the stories of sanctuary cases and ensuring the prophetic witness of the immigrant taking sanctuary is heard at the national level;

- Defend administrative policies such as prosecutorial discretion so that we can still win stays of deportation case by case and keep sacred spaces and schools protected under the Sensitive Locations guidelines;

- Work alongside undocumented students to defend the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival program (DACA)

- Support local work to defend Sanctuary cities or local detainer policies and push back against unjust policies that enlist local police to do immigration enforcement such as the Secure Communities (S-Comm) or 287g in the jails.

- Participate and help create protection networks to provide know your rights education, sanctuary space, legal assistance, housing assistance and bail support funds;
- Stop extension and further militarization of the border wall and any attempt to increase criminalization or mandatory sentencing for immigrants;
- Defend asylum seekers by pushing back against expedited removal and helping provide critical resources such as legal assistance so they can defend and win their case.