

OFFERING SANCTUARY is a key means by which faith communities provide direct assistance and public witness in support of immigrants.

1. WHAT DOES A SANCTUARY CONGREGATION DO?

A Sanctuary Congregation houses an immigrant (or perhaps a family) on church property in order to prevent the immigrant from being taken into custody and becoming subject to deportation. A church does not “hide” a person in sanctuary but rather supports her/him by appealing to immigration authorities and mobilizing public opinion in favor of a stay of deportation. A “Toolkit” currently circulated within the Sanctuary movement states: “Those who enter into Sanctuary should have a reasonable potential of receiving a stay of removal, order of supervision or some other form of administrative relief.” [“Sanctuary Toolkit: Trump Era,” SanctuaryNotDeportation.org]

2. WHY DISCUSS SANCTUARY AND WHY NOW?

Offering sanctuary is the most direct, immediate, personal and fully embodied means of advocating for justice and mercy (Micah 6:8) for “the alien who resides with you” (Lev 19:34). The number of immigrants in need of justice and mercy is likely to increase under the new administration in Washington, which has promised to pursue an aggressive policy of deporting undocumented immigrants, following legalistic rather than humanistic principles. Given the reputation of PNECC as a progressive congregation, there is a good chance that a request for sanctuary may come to us, whether or not we take a public stand as a Sanctuary Congregation. Therefore, it makes sense to have agreed upon an answer to the question in advance.

3. WHO MIGHT SEEK SANCTUARY?

Unlike in the 1980s, when a sanctuary movement arose to protect refugees fleeing political violence in Central America, today’s new sanctuary movement is more likely to serve those who have come to the US to flee social instability and economic distress. Many advocates for sanctuary view these conditions as a form of displaced violence in which the US is complicit. These conditions may worsen under President Trump’s “America First” program, creating a double bind in which more immigrants are told “you’re not welcome here” while at the same time it becomes even more of a struggle to survive “there,” in a home country further impoverished by US trade and foreign policy. Moreover, patterns of immigration complicate the definition of “home.” Seekers of sanctuary are often desperate to stay united with family members who may have legal standing to remain in the US. By commonly reported estimates, “eleven million undocumented persons are living in the United States, the majority of whom have lived here for more than ten years” [PCUSA website citing American Immigration Council]—that is, long enough to feel at home in this country, to become valued members of their communities, and to be raising children who are US citizens.

4. HAVE THE TWO DENOMINATIONS REPRESENTED AT PNECC TAKEN A POSITION ON SANCTUARY?

Offering sanctuary is recognized as a means of mission and public witness by both the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ.

5. HOW MANY SANCTUARY CONGREGATIONS EXIST TODAY?

According to the main website for the movement, sanctuarynotdeportation.com, there are over 800 sanctuary congregations. Noel Anderson of Church World Service reports that since 2014, thirteen churches in nine cities have provided sanctuary to fifteen people at risk of imminent deportation.

6. IS SANCTUARY LEGAL?

“There is a law against bringing in and harboring persons not authorized to be in the U.S. (INA Sec.274) While we are clearly not bringing people in, whether we are harboring someone is up for interpretation. Some courts have interpreted harboring to require concealment of a person, when we declare Sanctuary for an individual we are bringing them into the light of the community, not concealing them in the dark of secrecy. (U.S. V Costello, 66 F.3d 1040 (7th Cir. 2012)) Other courts have interpreted harboring to be simple sheltering. (U.S. V Acosta de Evans, 531 F.2d 428 (9th Cir. 1976)). . . . To date no one has ever been arrested for offering Sanctuary. . . . no congregation has been prosecuted for allowing undocumented people to find shelter and safety in their house of worship.” [“Sanctuary Toolkit: Trump Era,” SanctuaryNotDeportation.org]

7. WHAT IS THE POLICY OF IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES REGARDING SANCTUARY?

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) currently operates under official guidance recognizing schools, hospitals and houses of worship as “sensitive locations.” ICE agents are advised not to pursue suspect immigrants at these locations except in special circumstances. Even while the “sensitive locations” policy remains in effect, there is no guarantee that ICE agents will not come on to church property. Plans for that possibility need to be in place.

8. IS A SANCTUARY CONGREGATION EXPECTED TO HOUSE MULTIPLE SANCTUARY SEEKERS AT ONE TIME?

For a short time period, e.g., during an immigration raid, “a Sanctuary House of Worship can open its doors to fearful people to let them stay in a safe space while they get the latest information, learn their rights, and plan what to do next. Very few immigrants will want to take ‘physical sanctuary’ once they learn the details; instead, they will learn how to fight for their rights wherever they are.” [“How to Be a Sanctuary Church,” Judson Memorial Church, New York City]

9. IS A SANCTUARY CONGREGATION EXPECTED TO TAKE IN ANYONE WHO REQUESTS SANCTUARY?

A Sanctuary Congregation, acting through a designated representative, such as the Senior Pastor, makes an independent assessment of suitability for sanctuary on the occasion of each request. Some congregations require a signed agreement, stipulating specific terms, before an individual is admitted into sanctuary.

10. HOW WOULD PNECC POLICY REGARDING SANCTUARY BE DECIDED?

Adopting a policy to provide sanctuary would require a vote at a special meeting of the congregation called by the Governing Board, which has projected that the earliest possible date for holding such a meeting would be May 21. The vote would probably act on a resolution broadly addressing PNECC mission for welcoming immigrants, listing a set of commitments such as those shown on the first page of this presentation.