

# Should St. Mark's UMC become a *Sanctuary Congregation*?

***When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-34)***

Congress has failed to pass significant immigration reform. As people of faith living in this community, we are called to welcome the sojourner and love our neighbor; speak truth to power by helping the oppressed; and act to help our community and the immigrant families who face separation through deportation. The United Methodist Church (UMC) affirms the worth, dignity, and inherent value and rights of all persons regardless of their nationality or legal status.

## **What is *sanctuary*?**

This is an ancient tradition that the Hebrew people used to allow temples and whole cities to declare themselves places of refuge for persons accused of a crime. This allowed the refugee to resolve their accusation before a harsh retribution was carried out. Later, in medieval Europe, churches became places of refuge for those who considered themselves falsely accused. The same *sanctuary* concept underlay the Underground Railroad during slavery in the United States, and, more recently, during the 1980's, churches provided refuge for those fleeing oppression in Central America.

## **Who are those seeking *sanctuary*?**

The PICO (People Improving Communities through Organization) network has a legal services team who are able to assess, accurately, whether someone has administrative relief available to them. If so, the individual or family is able to enter into sanctuary with a reasonable expectation of receiving a stay of removal or having their deportation order closed all together. By the time an individual or family needs to enter into *sanctuary* all other legal avenues have been pursued and a final order of deportation has been issued or win deferred action.

## **Declaring *sanctuary***

St. Mark's will be very visible in declaring ourselves a *Sanctuary Congregation* and will make very public the name or names of persons being given *sanctuary*. The process begins with a Declaration of Being a Sanctuary Congregation, which may be circulated to the local media. This document makes clear the faith commitment of the community. Publicizing the name of the person(s) involved brings attention to the case, mobilizing the church community, in advocacy for the individual. Once a congregation has made the decision to declare *sanctuary* for an individual, it is publicly announced at a press conference and prayer vigil, at which time the individual and their family enters into the premises of the house of worship. The individual in need of *sanctuary* remains at the house of worship until they are granted a stay of deportation.

## **Some basic questions and answers:**

### **1. Are we jeopardizing our nonprofit 501(c)(3) status?**

According to Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), this issue has not yet been resolved. St. Mark's is part of a national/international denomination, which is incorporated within the United States. It seems unlikely that St. Mark's could be singled out for direct legal action.

### **2. Can St. Mark's be fined, or the leaders be held legally liable?**

The executive order, *Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States*, signed by President Trump several weeks ago includes a clause making it unlawful to help an undocumented immigrant. Section 6 of the order is so broad it could apply to advocates, non-profits, organizers and even congregations. There is no field precedent but anything is possible. The more congregations involved (800 across the US currently), the less likely this is to happen. There are clear statutes concerning the harboring of undocumented persons, but the definition of harboring, to date, includes the notion of concealment or hiding. By publicizing the presence of the undocumented person/s, this avoids the legal definition of *harboring*.

### **3. What would *sanctuary* look like at St. Mark's?**

As a Christian community, St. Mark's feels a moral obligation to help the refugee or immigrant facing deportation. This obligation forces this community to commit time, effort and financial means to house an individual or family on the St. Mark's campus for an undetermined period of time. It could be a few days or even a few months.

There will need to be a designated space on the church property for this purpose. There will need to be a kitchen, laundry, bathroom and shower provided. There will be needs for food, clothing, toiletries as well as other expressions of support. Members of the congregation will need to be present 24/7 in order to provide both companionship and a witnessing presence. The leadership believes that the campus facilities that are currently available for Family Promise, in Grace Café, can easily be adapted to meet these needs.

Those accompanying the persons seeking *sanctuary* will need to be trained. St. Mark's will also have to provide a rapid response and support team in case of press conferences, raids, protests, etc. Lastly, church members must be willing to call legislative representatives and government officials for action on this issue. St. Mark's is not in this alone. Through Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), there is a support network that will vet the asylum seeker and provide the legal back-up required. In addition, there are ACT churches that are designated at different levels of support. For example, a Level 1 church might be able to provide the facilities but a Level 2 church might not have the facilities but would be able to provide food and clothing, companionship or appointment driving services. Currently, there are 800 congregations throughout the United States participating in the *sanctuary* movement. In Sacramento, Congregation B'nai Israel is the only congregation currently ready to accept asylum seekers. Several others are in the inquiry phase like St. Mark's.

### **4. What if I don't want to get involved with the plan to become a Sanctuary Congregation? Will I be legally liable?**

You might be very sympathetic to the idea of becoming a Sanctuary Congregation, or you may disagree with the action that others wish to take. If so, you will have the ability to "opt—out" and not participate. Provision will be made for those who do not support the plan to sign a document saying that you do not support the congregation's action. This is a personal choice and decision; and all choices of conscience will be respected. A large contingent of community support will, of course, be needed to move forward with the program. As always, you are invited to keep St. Mark's and its ministries in your prayers.

#### References:

Sacramento, a Sanctuary city? <https://www.ilrc.org/sites/default/files/resources/sacramento.pdf>

Sacramento, police/sheriff position? <http://ww.abc10.com/news/local/sheriff-sacramento-county-is-not-a-sanctuary-jurisdiction/393578068>

UMC Book of Resolutions? <https://umc-gbcs.org/resolutions/welcoming-the-migrant-to-the-united-states>

Please continue to pray for God's leading in what the St. Mark's community should do about becoming a *Sanctuary Congregation*.