



CBF Advocacy

Sanctuary Resource for Congregations

Foundations

The 2016 United States presidential campaign season was often marked by hateful and harmful rhetoric aimed at immigrants, refugees and practitioners of other religions. Shortly after the inauguration, several executive orders produced fear in our immigrant brothers and sisters and led, in part, to a rash of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish hate-crimes. Understandably, immigrants are afraid of harassment and deportation; followers of minority religions have been victims of hatred and bigotry; and refugees worry that their new home will no longer accept them. This current reality has brought the church-based sanctuary movement back into the light. Some churches are declaring themselves sanctuary congregations; others are in a process of discernment and decision-making, while others are simply trying to wrap their minds around what this all means.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Advocacy Action Team of Immigrants and Refugees hopes to assist all of our churches, but especially the church that is simply trying to catch up. This resource will help educate your church about the history of Christian hospitality and sanctuary, to understand what it means to create a culture of sanctuary in your congregation, and to consider some practical ministries that will support immigrant populations around your church.

Hospitality: An ancient spiritual practice

Hospitality was an important practice in biblical times. From Abraham's showing hospitality to strangers on the road to Jesus' criticizing of his hosts for not extending common courtesies, hospitality has been cherished and defended in the Bible. Often, hosts portrayed in the Bible are recorded as welcoming complete strangers, sometimes at extreme costs to themselves and their family. The Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament is *philoxenia*, literally "the love of strangers."

Over the course of time, however, this practice has disappeared. Just listen to the words of John Owen, a Puritan theologian in the 17th century who bemoaned the fact that what was once offered to needy strangers is with us "applied unto a bountiful, and it may be, profuse entertainment of friends, relations, neighbors, acquaintances, and the like" (Pohl 1999, 37). No longer was hospitality seen as spiritual practice to welcome the stranger; instead it was for friends who were able and expected to reciprocate. In our current context, hospitality is most often seen as an industry, where one pays for lodging and food while on the road.

It is important that we remember key components of Christian hospitality. First, Christian hospitality is offered to anyone who needs it, without regard as to whether that person can reciprocate or not. It is unconcerned with payment, reciprocity or the perceived worthiness of a recipient.

Second, Christian hospitality, at times, prioritizes offering hospitality to those least able to repay the favor because it realizes that their inability to reciprocate precludes their participation in normal hospitality structures.



Third, it is seen as having spiritual and ultimate significance. In showing hospitality, we are welcoming Christ.

Sanctuary: An outgrowth of hospitality and love

Different from but connected to this concept of hospitality is the concept of refuge or sanctuary. From very records in the Old Testament, we see through both legal code and story how important it was to protect those in need of safety. In Genesis, we read the troubling story of Lot's receiving visitors and protecting them from the mobs that would do them harm. In Numbers 35, we see how the Israelites set aside certain cities to be cities of refuge, where those who had killed someone else, especially if it were accidental, could seek safety from reprisal. We see precursors to this with the way, after having murdered his brother Abel, God placed a mark on Cain so that others would not harm him.

This concept of offering refuge and protection to those who need it can be seen in our more recent history as well. The underground railroad is a prime example in the United States, where slaves who were fleeing the South found refuge in homes and churches as they travelled north. More recently, we see this in what some have termed, "the righteous Gentiles of the holocaust," or those who protected Jews and others from slaughter during World War II. Some of them were driven by the Christian conviction that all people have deep worth that is worthy of defense.

The concept of sanctuary, as we now see, has deep roots in Christian theology, spirituality and history. It's important to remember this foundation as we transition to our conversations of how sanctuary has been used in the United States—specifically in regard to immigration.

Immigrant Sanctuary in the United States

The use of sanctuary for immigrants in the United States stems from the 1980s. During that time, Central American asylum seekers whose cases were denied were being detained and sent back to face extreme violence and death. Churches in the southwestern United States began offering sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution while advocating that the United States change the way in which it grants asylum. Over the course of time, many were shielded from deportation and in the end laws regarding asylum were changed.

More recently, the New Sanctuary Movement was birthed with a different aim. While the first movement of the 1980s shielded from deportation and, in some instances, transported asylum seekers northward towards Canada, the New Sanctuary Movement has taken up the call to protect and defend immigrants being unjustly deported. Currently, the main goal is not to harbor undocumented immigrants in the church for an indefinite period of time. Instead, the goal is to temporarily protect and minister to an immigrant whose deportation may be imminent, while advocating with the government on behalf of the immigrant for discretion.

In the early 2000s, this model was born and was used occasionally with great success. Now, with policy changes that have resulted in an increased emphasis on deporting all removable immigrants—not just those with violent criminal histories—there is an urgent and pressing need for congregations to create cultures of sanctuary and welcome. Fear is running rampant in immigrant communities as families have been separated, children have lost their fathers, and parents have seen their children deported to countries they barely know. The church ought to be the primary place where hospitality, welcome and care are offered to immigrants in our communities.



Definitions

Immigrant – Anyone who lives outside of his or her homeland for any reason.

Asylum Seeker – Someone seeking protection from persecution in his or her country of origin upon arriving to the United States.

Refugee – In the United States, a refugee is someone who has been admitted to the United States for protection through a stringent years-long process that begins with vetting by the United Nations in the designated refugee camp and vetting by several US law enforcement agencies.

Undocumented Immigrant – Any immigrant who does not have proper documentation to live in the United States. This includes people who once had visas that are now expired as well as people who crossed a border without passing through a checkpoint. There is no legal way for these people to work, to obtain state IDs in most states, or to pursue higher education. This term is preferred to the often-used term of *illegal immigrant* because, while the act of being present without proper documentation is a civil offense (not criminal), no person should be considered “illegal.”

Sanctuary City – Jurisdictions that strive to preserve a firewall of separation between local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement. Sanctuary cities comply with Immigration and Customs Enforcement when dangerous criminals are captured, but they do not enforce immigration law through their day-to-day activities. In this way they seek to maintain community trust and are better able to keep immigrant communities safe.

Sanctuary Church – Any church that has chosen to provide physical shelter to an immigrant facing deportation. This shelter is not considered harboring, but instead is done publicly in hopes that Immigration and Customs Enforcement will offer deferred action or some other form of relief from deportation. They are able to do so effectively because of a longstanding practice of not enforcing deportation orders in “sensitive locations” such as churches and schools.

Sanctuary Coalition – A network of supporting churches and institutions that work with the sanctuary church by offering meals, through letter writing campaigns, and with other supportive measures.

Culture of Welcome – The posture of any church that welcomes immigrants and offers places of safety and security to immigrants.

Creating a Culture of Welcome: What can we do?

The first point of entry for a sanctuary church is to create a culture of welcome in the church. It is imperative that more of our churches find ways to demonstrate to their immigrant neighbors that they are welcome and safe when they are with us. This does not necessarily mean your church will become a sanctuary church, but that you will take steps to demonstrate inclusivity and welcome, helping where you can. There are many things a church can do to create a culture of welcome. Some churches may decide to offer sanctuary to immigrants fearing deportation. Not every congregation can do this, but *all* congregations can have a role to play in welcoming their immigrant neighbors.



Step One: Meet your neighbors

The first step to creating a culture of welcome is to ask who ought to be welcomed and where in your community they are. Drive around your neighborhood, going down roads you don't often travel, paying attention to the faces you see. Notice the store signs and restaurants that are present, and the churches you come across. Is an immigrant presence visible? Where do they seem to come from? What brought them here? Then, reach out to local church leaders within that area, finding community-based organizations that are present in the community. Learn the stories of the immigrants and how you can help. A good way to start that conversation is by saying something like this: "We come from X Baptist church, and we really just want to find a way to be a good neighbor to you all." Build those relationships and learn how you and your church can partner with them in their community. Out of that relationship, step two can arise.

Step Two: Discern Ministry

It could be that the immigrant community near you is well organized and simply needs your visible partnership and support. It could also be that there are many things your church could do with and for the immigrant community. Through those relationships, and by looking at what skill sets and gifts your congregation has, you can explore ministry opportunities. A brief list of possible ministries follows, but it is in no way exhaustive or necessarily prescriptive. While these types of ministries are great and encouraged, they must fit your context.

English Classes – Most immigrants lament their inability to speak English. Offering basic conversational English classes can go a long way in forging relationships with immigrants and helping them understand the basics of their new home.

After-School Programs – Many immigrants have to work long, hard hours to make ends meet. In addition to this, many have a desire for their children to excel, but their inability to speak English impedes their ability to help their children with their studies. After-school programs that focus on education will be very helpful in many communities.

Citizenship Classes – For immigrants with an opportunity to become citizens, such classes can be helpful and offer an opportunity for the church to reach out to this community in a very positive way.

Legal Counsel Ministry – Immigration law is exceedingly complex and hard to navigate. There are ways for churches to provide legal counsel to immigrants on a low-cost or pro-bono level. Such a ministry will go far in breaking down barriers of distrust between you and the immigrant community.

Public Policy and Individual Advocacy– Immigrants who are not naturalized citizens cannot vote and, for that reason, may also feel they have no voice in civic life. Speaking with your immigrant neighbors on issues that concern them can make a large difference to them, while opening your own eyes and those of your congregation. The stories of why they came here are powerful. Listen to them. Be willing to speak out on their behalf and, more importantly, help make sure their own voices are heard in the political process. Advocacy can also be individual and as simple as helping immigrant neighbors navigate life here. What to us would be simple activities, such as going to the DMV, visiting the social security office, making a doctor's appointment, or opening a bank account, can be difficult, stressful and fear-producing. Helping advocate for your neighbors in these basic ways can go far.

Membership in a Sanctuary Coalition – Perhaps your area already has a sanctuary coalition that is active in providing sanctuary to immigrants at risk of deportation. If so, you can become part of that coalition, helping write letters or making phone calls to ICE, representatives and senators in the US Congress, hosting or



being a part of news conferences, hosting vigils, providing meals or more. Sanctuary takes place in a coalition of churches working together. Your church doesn't have to be the lone church.

Step Three: Join the effort

An individual church's process will make this step different for everyone. But once you've decided to go forward on a single initiative, do so.

Specifics on Legal Ministry and Sanctuary

Legal Ministry

Due to the lack of quality, affordable legal representation for immigrants, the Department of Justice has established the recognition and accreditation program. Through this program, non-profits, including churches, can seek recognition by the Department of Justice as an organization that serves the low-income immigrant community with legal representation. In most cases, these organizations cannot provide defense of deportation, but can help with what are called affirmative petitions (family-based visas, visas for victims of violent crimes, human trafficking, and domestic violence, and other such visas).

These organizations must have at least one individual who is accredited by the Department of Justice as the representative who is legally allowed to offer legal counsel and to represent clients. This person must attend a 40-hour course on the basics of immigration law, shadow an immigration attorney or accredited representative, and complete online education through webinars in order to be approved by the DOJ.

If such a ministry is of interest to you and your church, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship maintains a list of churches and partner organizations that do this work. Contact one of them to help you understand what this ministry will entail and how to proceed.

Sanctuary

It is helpful here to outline exactly what sanctuary is and what it is not. Sanctuary is NOT hiding all undocumented immigrants from immigration authorities. Sanctuary is protecting individuals with compelling cases from enforcement temporarily in order to publicly apply pressure to immigration authorities in hopes that they will award reprieve from deportation and, in exchange, focus efforts on higher priority deportation targets such as violent criminals.

Sanctuary requires a network of churches and individuals that will play various roles. It is recommended that a sanctuary coalition have legal representation by an immigration attorney who will take the case of the client who has been put into removal proceedings. Some churches in the coalition will provide the immediate housing needs of the immigrant on their property. Others will mobilize to write letters, make phone calls and visit ICE offices to advocate for the immigrant in question. Others will help with logistical support through providing food or meals to the housing church or assisting with transportation to school or doctor's appointments while they are in sanctuary.

There are several helpful resources and toolkits out there for exploring and establishing a sanctuary coalition.

