

CCSM Sanctuary Update, August 18, 2017

Since the Sanctuary Team unanimously voted on August 6th to host two members of the TransGay Caravan coming from Central America into the U.S. at the Nogales, AZ border, many of you may have wondered whether this situation was anticipated or included in our February declaration of CCSM as a sanctuary congregation. The short answer is yes and no. Yes, the motion we approved on February 29th includes this situation: "The Congregational Church of San Mateo declares itself a Sanctuary Congregation and as such will open our doors to welcome into Sanctuary undocumented individuals who are facing deportation and in need of safe refuge." No, we didn't anticipate this particular urgent situation—supporting members of the first TransGay caravan, who are escaping from sexual violence, forced sexual labor, and death threats in Central America. Yet, if we are to follow Jesus' example of extravagant welcome, we are offering safe refuge to some of the most marginalized, vulnerable and abused people in the world.

Here's some history of our process and what we have learned about present ways to offer sanctuary to those most in need.

Following the vote at our January 2017 congregational meeting, CCSM studied whether to declare itself a Sanctuary Congregation during the following month. The Sanctuary team led our efforts as we explored what being a Sanctuary congregation meant, in informational and discussion sessions, in one on one conversations, in presentations by immigration lawyers and knowledgeable consultants.

We looked at why we wanted to be involved. The second of our congregation's three priorities is: "to strengthen our commitment, action and effectiveness in social justice and outreach: We commit our beliefs to action recognizing that God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no face but our face." We recognized that deportation of our neighbors and the breaking up of immigrant families in our communities are among the most compelling social justice issues of our time."

Although they are neighbors coming from other countries, hosting two Caravan members means assisting them in avoiding deportation, in addition to removing them from detention. Their cause is a most compelling and urgent social justice issue at present.

We created a two-page handout that summarized what we knew at the time about Sanctuary and what we hoped to accomplish. The Sanctuary Team discussed this at meetings and distributed it to the congregation as a whole. We hoped to help "prevent deportation of persons facing an order of deportation, on a case-by-case basis, one at a time, in concert with their legal representation." Our role would be to host the person in our church, and possibly their family too, while the person is engaged in legal proceedings intended to prevent them from being deported. We anticipate that the duration of a person's stay with us in Sanctuary would be from three weeks to three months. We encouraged congregation members to explore the many facets of Sanctuary on their own, with suggestions of links to knowledgeable sources.

The Caravan members are in legal proceedings to gain asylum in the U.S and avoid deportation. We have offered Sanctuary to Kevelin and Jose for a commitment of up to three months, with continued support until they find permanent housing. We are working with the other Bay Area sponsors of four other Caravan members, in conjunction with Faith in Action and the legal team for the Caravan. Our immediate concern is to bring them out of detention.

We expected an appropriate candidate for Sanctuary would fit this scenario: (1) ICE would not likely consider them a priority for deportation; (2) they are a good candidate for prosecutorial discretion, winning a stay of removal or an order of supervision or some other form of legal relief from deportation; and (3) they would satisfy any other requirements specified in a potential Memorandum of Understanding with the guest's lawyer and other supporting organization, such as Faith in Action.

Since we shared this expectation with you, we've learned that this scenario does not exist in reality at the present time. Enforcement of immigration policies since January 2017 have substantially changed and keep changing. Essentially, there are no good candidates for prosecutorial discretion or winnable cases.

The current political environment is chaotic, subject to rapid changes and arbitrary decision-making along several levels of the Homeland Security system, from the local ICE officer who has much discretion on up to the President. Every undocumented immigrant seems to be a priority for deportation. This necessitates flexibility as we consider creating safe spaces for our undocumented neighbors, who need a safe place for a variety of reasons and situations. (i.e., the local case of Maria Mendoza Sanchez, <http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Deportation-order-splits-Oakland-family-and-11746484.php-photo-13666124> Maria and her husband were denied their appeal and flew to Mexico with their son two days ago)

Our original expectation of hosting an undocumented neighbor from a nearby family with a winnable case from a final order of deportation is not realistic. If that neighbor can appeal, they do not need sanctuary. Instead we've seen other sanctuary congregations in California hosting undocumented immigrants, in order to assist them to avoid or come out of ICE detention, i.e. jail, while they pursue their legal appeals to remain in the U.S. These immigrants may come from other states that were transported to California detention facilities or are coming into detention from other countries.

We continue to evolve as a sanctuary church, seeking to be in solidarity with the most vulnerable. Thank you CCSM for your commitment to love and justice. Should Jose and Kevelin be released to be sheltered with us, we will embark on another journey of transformation together.

In solidarity,

Valerie Duecker and Mike Hill
CCSM Sanctuary co-chairs (on behalf of the sanctuary team)

**Note from Penny: This letter has been endorsed by members of the sanctuary vetting team, by the co-chair of the Latino Ministry Team, the chair of MSJ and by our moderator and vice-moderator.*