

Sanctuary: Caring for the Stranger

- presented by Carolyn Madden, January 18, 2015



At our UUA General Assembly in Providence, Rhode Island this past year we voted to accept the 2013 Statement of Conscience on Immigration as a Moral Issue which states that **“A belief in the ‘inherent worth and dignity of every person’ is core to Unitarian Universalism”** and that **“As religious people, our Principles call us to acknowledge the immigrant experience and to affirm and promote the flourishing of the human family.”** And to support the work of the previous 4 years on immigration, Sister Simone Campbell, one of America's most articulate and effective advocates for compassionate public policy and immigration reform, was the General Assembly Ware Lecture speaker.. **Sister Simone** spoke about a journey of faith that walks toward trouble. Well, in the 1980s, *this congregation found trouble*. Religious communities across the nation, inspired by liberation theology and outraged by our government’s involvement in the support of right wing factions in Central America joined together in a movement that cried out against torture and persecution by participating in what was to become known as the Sanctuary Movement. The First UU of Ann Arbor, along with the Quakers and , Temple Beth Emmeth, and Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice, conspired together to see how we could serve those fleeing persecution to Ann Arbor within our congregations. The journey from theory to practice, from the “talk to the walk” was ahead of us.

In June 1988, Francisco Rodriguez arrived at the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation, followed a few months later by his wife Angelina and the Rodriguez' s 3 children, 6 year old Oscar, 4 year old Erica and 2 year old Carolina. Their journey from El Salvador was filled with tragedy, fear and loss but they eventually found peace and safety here in Ann Arbor thanks to the economic and emotional support of this congregation and this community. They lived for 6 years in the carriage house at our church on Washtenaw Avenue and then moved to the Forest Hills Co-op on Ellsworth road.

How did we begin this journey? In 1984, the Social Concerns committee, began to explore the historical and political situation in Central America. The Committee began to educate itself and the congregation through various forums, workshops and services. As we continued to meet, a growing commitment emerged for us to take a more active role in challenging U.S. Policy in Central America. We wanted to "walk the talk. " We decided with the support of our **senior minister Ken Phifer**, to work toward bringing a family to live in Sanctuary and to provide a safe haven for refugees fleeing persecution in Central America much like the children who have recently come across our borders.

To bring a family here was neither a quick or simple process. After educating ourselves, the newly formed Sanctuary Committee, decided to take the issue of sanctuary to the entire congregation. It was decided that a 75% majority vote of the congregation would be needed for us to provide this kind of support.

The vote, at the **February 1985 congregational** meeting fell short. We received a 59% majority. But we didn't give up, we provided more education, more forums, and increased our community involvement. And in July, 1987, the congregation voted again and this time the vote **was 90% in favor of becoming a Sanctuary Congregation** A joyous day but another beginning of the journey to live up to what this vote meant for our congregation. We needed, not only the vote, but we needed money and resources in place, as per our agreement with the Board of Trustees. We eventually recruited over 90 people and got approximately \$2000 in pledges per month to support a family. When you take in a family it's an huge responsibility, there's no going back. We committed ourselves to an indefinite commitment to provide a family with legal, medical, financial and emotional support. For the next 18 years we continued to support the family.

The years of sanctuary for the Rodriguez family brought both turmoil and blessings. **Among the blessings** was another daughter Cristi (who with her mother, Angelina, sister Erica and brother Oscar

are with us today). **Another highlight** was when Francisco, in 1996 got off the deportation list and was then able to get a work permit. One of the most serious challenges (and one that was only funny in hindsight) was when the family went to Boblo Island for a day of family fun only to realize they had traveled into foreign lands, Boblo was Canadian. It took weeks to get the family back to their home in Ann Arbor.

And for our congregation, the saddest time was the death of Francisco in 2002. While we mourned his passing and continue to miss his gentle spirit, overall, our congregation continues to be enriched by our friendship with the family and the knowledge that for 18 years, this congregation and friends, committed our money and our energies to action through reason and compassion.



Today the former UU church at 1917 Washtenaw Ave is owned by the Stone Chalet Bed and Breakfast. The Carriage House where the Rodriguez family lived is used for meetings.