

SANCTUARY?

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What is sanctuary?

Sanctuary is a safe space traditionally located within a faith community, school or hospital which is generally recognized as “off limits” by law enforcement agents. In a 2011 memo the Department of Homeland Security clarified its longstanding policy that Immigration enforcement activities including interviews, arrests, searches and surveillance should not occur in these “sensitive locations.”

2. What does it mean to be a sanctuary congregation?

A sanctuary congregation is one that is: a) willing to publicly advocate for immigration justice and reform and b) willing to welcome an immigrant in danger of immediate detention and deportation into physical sanctuary within the church building for a period of time. UUAA members will vote on October 22 as to whether to become a sanctuary congregation.

3. How does the New Sanctuary Movement differ from the 1980s sanctuary movement?

In the 1980s many congregations of conscience, including our own UUAA, offered safe asylum to Central Americans fleeing violence in their own countries. It was often a long-term commitment. The New Sanctuary Movement seeks to offer undocumented members of our own community, who are threatened with impending detention and deportation, a limited time to pursue legal channels to resolve their immigration status.

4. Why is sanctuary an issue now?

Since January 2017, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has harshly modified its protocol, resulting in the deportation of individuals who had previously been told they deserved to stay in the United States. Millions of families living in the U.S. now live in constant fear. Members of our own community have been detained and deported despite decades of living, working, and contributing to our community.

5. Who might seek sanctuary?

Sanctuary might be a good strategy for someone who needs more time to pursue legal avenues to stop their deportation and who has strong ties to this community (e.g. a longtime resident with a family, a job, a school or business here) and/or one who faces extreme danger in returning to their country of origin.

6. What selection criteria would we use in choosing a sanctuary guest?

We would choose someone in danger of immediate detention and deportation who has a compelling story and a good case for attaining legal status.

7. Who would make the decision?

An immigrant seeking sanctuary would be vetted by an immigration attorney and referred to us because there is a strong case for winning a legal stay in the U.S. The immigrant must agree to sanctuary. Our senior minister, Board of Trustees, and representatives of the Immigration Action Coalition would together make the decision.

8. Who in our congregation supports UUAA becoming a sanctuary congregation?

Members of the Immigration Action Coalition lead the campaign for becoming a sanctuary congregation. Other groups within the UUAA congregation have discussed sanctuary with their members and are in support, including the Social Justice Council, the Board of Trustees, the Challenging Racism group, the Humanists, and the Justice in the Middle East group. In addition at the time this FAQ is being written, over 50 UUAA congregants have signed individual pledges to support an individual or family in sanctuary.

9. What value might the congregation expect from hosting a sanctuary family?

A better knowledge of world events, exposure to another culture, and a feeling of empowerment through living our UU principals and values are benefits reported by UUAA members involved with the El Salvadorian family welcomed into sanctuary by this congregation in the 1980s. Kat Parker of the First Unitarian Society of Denver, a sanctuary congregation since 2014, says, "Treating sanctuary like a spiritual practice rather than a political effort is important. It was transformative. It started with the transformation of our own hearts and moved on to the outward community. The transformation is in the doing."

10. Where would they stay?

In order to be protected in sanctuary, the immigrant guest would need to stay inside the UUAA building at all times. UUAA staff has identified the Marley Room in the Education Wing as a pleasant space where our sanctuary guest would have privacy and access to restrooms, shower, and a sink.

11. How long would the sanctuary period be?

Some cases may be resolved in a few days, weeks, or months. Others may take longer. Our congregation could set a time limit. The First Unitarian Society of Denver set a limit of three months with a review of the situation after that.

12. What would the cost be to UUAA?

The UUAA would be responsible for providing living space for the individual or family. Volunteers would provide food, shopping, social opportunities, and contribute financially. The sanctuary guest may raise funds through GoFundMe and other fundraising efforts.

13. How would the individual's or family's basic needs be met?

Volunteers within the UUAA congregation have already committed to providing meals, doing laundry, shopping, translating, offering friendship, and giving financial support. In addition, the Washtenaw Congregational Sanctuary — an interdenominational action group formed by the Washtenaw Interfaith Council for Immigrant Rights (WICIR), the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice (ICPJ), and the UUAA Immigration Action Coalition — has pledged to provide the majority of the support needed to a sanctuary congregation. Fundraising is already in progress.

14. How would staff be impacted?

The staff is currently considering and discussing the ways it may be affected. It is hoped that a new part-time social justice position will help alleviate some of the pressure on staff.

15. Is becoming a sanctuary congregation illegal?

Becoming a sanctuary congregation is an act of civil disobedience. Because it is a public act and the intent is not to conceal, the Center for Constitutional Rights maintains the congregation will not be violating federal law. However, this argument has not been tested in court.

16. Is anyone at risk of being arrested if we declare ourselves a sanctuary congregation?

If Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) comes to question our immigrant guest while in sanctuary, legally we would not need to allow them inside the church building without a warrant. If they have a properly filled out warrant, we would not interfere. Over the past forty years, no U.S. congregation has been prosecuted for providing sanctuary.

16. Would our insurance rates go up?

Ed Lynn has discussed sanctuary with our insurance agent. The agent assures us that we would be fully covered without an increase in our premium as long as we are not breaking the law. (See #15 above.)

17. Could we lose our non-profit status?

No. Declaring sanctuary and providing shelter to someone in need is an act of faith and an act of justice. Non-profits cannot support individual political candidates. They are free, however, to advocate for political issues.

18. Are we zoned to have someone live in our building?

Our neighborhood is zoned residential.

19. Will someone need to stay overnight in the church with our sanctuary guest?

Yes. A volunteer would need to stay with our sanctuary guest whenever staff is not in the building. Volunteers would come from our congregation and from Washtenaw Congregational Sanctuary and would be trained in how to handle emergency situations.

20. What security measures will be taken?

Volunteers will be trained in what to do if federal agents such as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) come to UUAA. Emergency protocols will be posted at all entries to our building.

More information? Contact Cheryl Valentine at: cherylmatzmervalentine@gmail.com