

“Sanctuary is not the goal. It’s a tactic.”
Presentation to First Church in Oberlin, United Church of Christ
March 18, 2018

It is truly an honor to be here with all of you today.

As I reflected and prepared my comments for all of you today, I reviewed information John Gates shared with me that included the answers to your questions about what it means for communities of faith to offer sanctuary

- I also spoke with Steve Volk and he and John shared with me his notes from his presentation with you on Wednesday.
- And so in order to provide you with *something new*, I decided to focus on some of the insights people have shared with me as I have begun to interview and have conversations with those who are currently in sanctuary, leaders who are new to this movement as well as seasoned veterans of this work.
- My hope is that sharing their words with you offers useful information, insight, and tools as you continue your discernment process.

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So I have titled my talk today as “Sanctuary is not the goal. It is a tactic.”

- This notion of sanctuary as a *tactic* rather than a *goal* is a quotation from Pastor Allison Harrington, current pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona.
- As many if not all of you know, Southside Presbyterian Church and Reverend John Fife, who was the pastor for more than 30 years, played an important role in first sanctuary movement in the 1980s.
- And from what I have read and what John has shared with me, this faith community, along with others in Oberlin and Lorain County, were actively involved in that first sanctuary movement in the 1980s, with 20 people from El Salvador and Guatemala being helped and supported during this time.

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- There are important continuities between the 1980s and now—important religious and political and religious commitments that informed the decision of faith communities in the 1980s to respond to the human toll of American foreign policy and intervention in Central America

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- and to the current moment in which we find ourselves, with people of faith and others wanting to respond to the impact of U.S. immigration policy on the lives of undocumented immigrants.

Both in the 1980s and now, when faith communities look for a scriptural basis for sanctuary, we often turn to Matthew 25 and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

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where we are told that the Son of Man will separate people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, *a stranger and you welcomed me*, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.”

- So here we are reminded of the centrality of welcoming the stranger to our faith.
- Indeed, we are told that in welcoming others, we welcome Christ himself. 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these *least brothers* of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25: 40)

This powerful message is one of the most quoted scriptural basis for providing sanctuary for strangers, foreigners, and newcomers.

But as I have learned in talking with other scholars and activists involved in this new sanctuary movement, there is a different scriptural passage that might be more appropriate for today’s sanctuary movement and what we are seeing today.

- AS you all noted in your response to question #2 of the FAQs of why you are considering offering sanctuary, “local and national news have recently reported several cases of people who have lived here for many years. People raising families with no criminal record who work and pay taxes, suddenly deported with no due process” (FAQs on Questions on Offering Sanctuary)
- So at this point we are not necessarily seeking a scriptural basis for **welcoming strangers**, but in fact, what the sanctuary is doing today is offering refuge to those who have *long resided, built meaningful lives and contributed in a range of way to the communities where we live and work*
- So the historian Sergio Gonzalez has offered the following scriptural basis for the new sanctuary movement:

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Ephesians 2: 19-22 “*So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*”

One of the really important things that distinguishes today’s sanctuary movement from the 1980s is the fact these are “no longer strangers and sojourners,” but our fellow citizens and members our communities. Examples of these fellow community members include:

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- Edith Espinal who after growing up and raising a family in Columbus for 22 years, was put in deportation proceedings in October 2017 and made the decision to take sanctuary
 - After briefly entering into sanctuary in the Columbus Mennonite church on September 5, 2017, the day Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the end of DACA—a decision informed by her understanding that she could apply for a stay of removal that was later denied on September 25—

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- Edith made the decision to enter into sanctuary once again on October 2 where she has remained.ⁱ

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Other examples in Ohio include:

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- Leonor Garcia, Forest Hills Mennonite Church (Cleveland Heights, she is from Akron) <https://www.fhcpresb.org/>
- Laura, from Painesville, Ohio and who is now in sanctuary in St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Mentor (a Painesville woman)
http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2017/10/mentor_church_gives_sanctuary.html
<http://www.standrew-mentor.com/sanctuary>

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These are not strangers or newcomers to Ohio.

- Each have lived here for many years and have worked and raised families and participated in community life
- And so their decision to seek sanctuary needs to be framed as a decision, a tactic, a strategy by our “fellow citizens” who are “being built together in to a dwelling place of God in the spirit.”
- And these decisions need to be understood not only in the context of the decisions of the current administration, but having its roots in the Obama administration, that, sadly, witnessed some of the highest levels of deportation, earning him the moniker, “Deporter-in-Chief” by immigration activists

But while this movement predates the current administration, it is important to note that of the 36 public sanctuary cases we see today, many are the direct result of the current administration's directives around immigrant apprehension, detention, and deportation

- The three public sanctuary cases in Ohio, for example, involved people who entered into sanctuary in Fall 2017.
- But it was in the mid 2000s that we began to see new sanctuary cases,

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- such as the case of Elvira Arrellano from Chicago, who in 2006 took sanctuary with her 7-year-old son inside Adalberto United Methodist Church in Humboldt Park where she remained for one year.
- Like many of those who were to follow Elvira Arrellano, they described their decision to go into sanctuary as a way to remain with her family.
- Edith, for example, described her decision to seek sanctuary in the Columbus Mennonite Church, by consistently referred to her family, especially her three

children, and how being able to remain near them compelled her to seek sanctuary.

- These sentiments were echoed in an interview she gave to the *Columbus Dispatch* when she explained how much her family needs her and how they rely on each other stating, “We very much need each other. I’m the one that guides the family and makes sure the kids are doing what they should be, that they’re not getting into trouble.”ⁱⁱ
- Like other undocumented mothers, Edith highlights her importance as a mother in her struggle to remain in Ohio, a familiar strategy whereby mothers make “claims of belonging that are based on or strengthened by their motherhood” (Pallares 2014, X).
- Political scientist Amalia Pallares has referred to these sanctuary practices as examples of “family activism,” a complex political strategy by immigrant rights activists as they construct, reinforce, challenge and redefine notions of family to challenge deportation and family separation (Pallares 2014: X, 23).

This kind of family activism is at the heart of today’s New Sanctuary movement.

But as Pastor Harrington noted, *sanctuary is not the goal. It is a tactic.*

So what is the goal of the current sanctuary movement?

According to the World Church Service, the goal is to ***create communities in which we can live together without fear***

- The goal, according to the ***Presbyterian Church USA’s discernment guide*** is to be in solidarity with immigrants and their families and communities in different ways and to respond to the call to love our neighbors and to discern what that call looks like in practice (9)
- For the Milwaukee-based ***organization Voces de la Frontera*** (Voices of the Borderlands) there are many goals informing the new sanctuary movement

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- And one way to think about the goals is to categorize them as ***immediate local, national and ecumenical goals***
 - ***Immediate Local Goal:*** “By offering sanctuary, we can fight individual cases, advocate to stop deportation, and win deferred action on a case-by-case level to keep families together.”
 - ***National Goal:*** “Amplify the moral imperative to stop deportations by lifting up the stories of sanctuary cases and ensuring the prophetic witness of the immigrant taking sanctuary is heard at the national level.”
 - ***Ecumenical Goal:*** Bring awareness in the wider faith community of our call to care for migrants and families. To support member of our faith community, and provide support for members of other faith communities as we struggle for similar goals” (5)

Although sanctuary is not necessarily the goal, but a tactic to create and live in communities without fear, it is clear that new policies and executive orders under the current administration have resulted in the highest numbers of people seeking sanctuary since the 1980s (CWS 2018: 6).

- According to the Church World Service, of the 57 public sanctuary cases since 2014, 37 or 65% of them entered in 2017
- And of the 37% who went into sanctuary in 2017, 9 of them were able to leave sanctuary with some sort of reprieve
- This dramatic increase in public sanctuary cases reflects Columbus-based community organizer and activist Ruben Castilla Herrera observation that, ***“Sanctuary is one of the only active forms of resistance we have now,”***

Sanctuary is one of the only active forms of resistance precisely because of the current administration’s increased apprehension and deportation of undocumented immigrants and, as the CWS notes, “key changes made by the administration to limit the ability of immigrants to obtain relief from deportation” which include:

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- Expanding the Department of Homeland Security’s removal priorities to include people who do not have a criminal record
- Increasing the number of 287(g) agreements with local law enforcement
- Pressuring and threatening local communities that limit their cooperation with ICE (we saw that most recently when Attorney Jeff Sessions visited California last week)
- Detaining immigrants at ICE check ins, regardless of good standing with ICE
- Shifting the processing guidelines for Stay of Removal Applications to require the person under threat of deportation to apply in the field office in person (ibid)

Given this landscape, it is not surprising that faith communities, elected and civic leaders, and community organizers have turned to sanctuary as a strategy to ***resist*** what many believe to be unjust laws and, as people of faith, to ***live out our most sacred duties that include***

- To “welcome “the stranger as an expression of covenant faithfulness” (Leviticus 19: 34)
- To love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22 35-50; Luke 10:27)
- And to act as the Good Samaritan did, caring for a stranger in need (Luke 10: 30-35) ,

In an interview with Reverend John Fife in January, he noted that while this is a struggle that involves people of faith as well as those who are not part of faith communities, he emphasized the special role people of faith have in this struggle:

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“faith, tradition, and the religious mandate to remain faithful to the Gospel drive the work we do. Faith is *the factor* that sustains a movement.”

So, in that spirit, I want to share one last slide

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with information from the Southern Arizona Sanctuary Coalition that has identified 4 key principles of the sanctuary movement:

1. Respect the leadership of directly affected people
2. Be steadfast in our adherence to our own faith traditions
3. Be relentlessly imaginative and brave
4. Pledge our highest allegiance to the mandates of our faith and not to the laws of the land

These four principles—respecting leadership, being steadfast, being relentless and brave, and adhering to the mandates of our faith, this is what is at the heart of this new sanctuary movement and what connects us to past movements across millennia.

- And it is captured really beautifully in Theo Rigby’s new film titled Sanctuary which is what I will leave you with in this short clip.

ⁱ “Woman says she is in Sanctuary at Columbus Church for her family,” *Columbus Dispatch*, <http://www.dispatch.com/news/20171004/woman-says-she-is-in-sanctuary-at-columbus-church-for-her-family>, October 3, 2017, accessed 20 November 2017. See also “Mexican Woman Again Seeks Sanctuary in Columbus Church” *Columbus Dispatch*, <http://www.dispatch.com/news/20171003/mexican-woman-again-seeks-sanctuary-in-columbus-church>

ⁱⁱ “Woman says she is in sanctuary at Columbus Church for her Family,” *Columbus Dispatch*, October 4, 2017, <http://www.dispatch.com/news/20171004/woman-says-she-is-in-sanctuary-at-columbus-church-for-her-family>