



Issue Paper

Immigration and the Sanctuary Movement in the United Methodist Church

Official Position of the Church

Individual Methodist churches have been providing sanctuary for runaway slaves and others for 200 years. In the 1980's individual United Methodist churches, as did many other denominations, provided sanctuary for persons escaping political and economic persecution in Central America. The General Conference, however, has never passed any legislation regarding the providing of sanctuary protection for undocumented immigrants.

Why This Is an Issue

Two years ago, in response to the public debate regarding undocumented immigrants and changes of procedures by the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security, a coalition of individual churches and immigrant rights organizations formed "the New Sanctuary Movement." The California-Nevada Conference passed a resolution of support of the movement. The Conference resolution approved support for clergy and local churches who seek to provide sanctuary to undocumented immigrants. The movement has also found support from the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ.

In 2006 a woman named Elvira Arellano sought sanctuary as an undocumented immigrant with her local church, Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago. On August 6, 2006 she was to report to immigration authorities for deportation to Mexico. Instead she went to her church. Her pastor, Walter Coleman, explained the decision of the church to offer her sanctuary. "Elvira is a member of our church and has been for three years," Mr. Coleman said. "She's one of our leaders. When it became clear there were no more immediate legal options for her, we prayed about it, and decided upon the course we've taken. Sanctuary is sometimes seen as a place to hide, but that's not the way we look at it. Sanctuary is a space provided by faith that allows a witness of faith. Elvira didn't hide. She proclaimed in front of the world that she was here and engaged in an act of civil disobedience to what she considered an unjust law."

Mrs. Arellona and her U.S. born son shared a room in an apartment above the storefront church, where they remained for 12 months. Federal authorities arrested Mrs. Arellano in Los Angeles and swiftly deported her to Mexico after she slipped out of the Chicago church to spearhead a nationwide campaign for reform.

The amount of public interest in this story and the fact that a United Methodist Church and pastor were involved insures that some will bring the issue of sanctuary to the General Conference.

Background Material

Religious Institutions in the United States do not have permission to harbor or protect those who have broken U.S. laws. Churches may have some protection in a 2005 law passed by Congress that gives religious institutions some limited right to recruit illegal aliens as church volunteers or missionaries. Sen. Robert Bennett of Utah introduced the legislation at the behest of the Mormon Church. The illegal immigrants would still be subject to arrest, but church officials could not be prosecuted for taking them on.

The tradition of religious sanctuary can be traced back to ancient times. The Old Testament, for example, sets aside “cities of refuge” for those who have broken the law (Numbers 35:9-15). By the fourth century after Christ, the tradition of sanctuary was formalized in the early church.

The principle of sanctuary declined in the years leading up to the Reformation. Chartered sanctuaries were abolished in 1540, and the church could no longer protect anyone guilty of treason, murder, rape, highway robbery, burglary, arson, or sacrilege. English criminals had no official recourse to the churches by the end of the 1600s. The idea of sanctuary remained in Catholic canon law until 1993.

Discussion Questions for Congregations

- What beliefs do you hold about God that inform your opinions and your actions about this topic?
- Is this an issue of civil law, individual rights, Christian faith or something else?
- If you were to write a statement for the Social Principles and the Book of Discipline what would it say?