

Reflections on Sanctuary: Guidance for Maine churches

By the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Episcopal Bishop of Maine

April 7, 2017

In the Anglican tradition, a sanctuary is the area immediately surrounding the altar. It is a holy space because it is here, at the altar, presbyters offer the Holy Eucharist to the people of God. The term, of course, goes back much further. The “holy of holies” in Solomon’s temple was known as the sanctuary, the place where the Ark of the Covenant resided. In both cases, the sacred status imbued the space with a sense of refuge and safety.

From the time of Constantine to the late Middle Ages across much of Europe, houses of worship afforded protection to those accused of crimes or debt. Indeed, English law recognized the church as a place of sanctuary from arrest from the fourth to the seventeenth centuries. Because the United States has never recognized such protection, the notion of churches offering immunity holds no legal sway beyond respect for the tradition.

However, *sanctuary* is our word. *Sanctum* means “holy” in Latin, from the same root we use to derive the word *saint*. Our churches should strive to be places of sanctuary - of safety, protection, support, and care - for all people, places of sanctuary from racism or any rhetoric that spews hatred or intolerance.

Over the past few months, in the wake of the travel bans and the uncertainty and fear they have elicited, I have been contacted by a number of Maine churches whose clergy and members are anxious to learn what and to what extent they can assist our neighbors who are fearful for their futures in Maine due to their legal status as refugees or asylum seekers.

Below I will attempt to offer definitions, guidance, and resources to assist members of our congregations in the good work of discerning the extent to which they will engage in “welcoming the stranger” to their communities. I think this discernment is important for each congregation to consider at both the parish and Vestry or Bishop’s Committee level and regardless of whether or not you are located in an area where New Mainers are settling. This is a conversation for all of us to enter fully and meaningfully.

DEFINITIONS

Some definitions might be a good place to start. I look no further than to those offered by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) at www.unrefugees.org.

Who is a refugee?

“A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot

return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. Refugees legally enter the United States in search of freedom, peace, and opportunity for themselves and their families.”

Before they enter the United States, those who are granted refugee status have been subjected by a lengthy and thorough security process by the UNHCR and the US Department of State. The federal government contracts with agencies - often faith-based organizations such as Episcopal Migration Ministries - in each state to handle the resettlement of refugee families. In our state, Catholic Charities of Maine is the only agency that resettles refugees for the federal government. They offer orientation, employment, and cultural adjustment, and many other services to those refugees assigned to Maine. In recent years, Catholic Charities has resettled refugees from more than 30 countries. In 2016 they resettled 642 recently arrived refugees in Maine.

Who is an asylum seeker?

“When people flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance. An asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.”

Asylum seekers often arrive in the US on a legal visa. Once they overstay that visa, they are no longer authorized to remain in the US. If they are fearful to return to their home country due to war, violence, or instability, they may apply to the US Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) for asylum. Currently there are about 300 pending asylum cases in Maine, and the wait for an interview with the South Portland office of USCIS can be many years because only 30 interviews are offered each year. Six months after applying for asylum, an asylum seeker may be granted a work permit in order to be legally employed while waiting for an interview. Asylum seekers do not have access to resettlement services provided to those who have secured refugee status.

WAYS FOR CHURCHES TO OFFER SANCTUARY

- Offer support, a safe gathering place, friendship and mentoring relationships to refugees and asylum seekers.
- Offer preaching and teaching to members of the congregation that upholds our Baptismal Covenant and Gospel mandates: seeking and serving Christ in all persons, respecting the dignity of every human being, loving our neighbors as ourselves, welcoming the stranger.
- Offer membership in all aspects of the life of the congregation: worship, service, formation, education, music, outreach.
- Cooperate to the minimum extent required by law if immigration or enforcement officials seek to enter church buildings to check papers, question, or detain people participating in our worship or activities of the church community. It would be a violation of the law to

prevent an immigration agent with a warrant listing the name of an individual and signed by a federal judge from entering your church.

- Volunteer, as a church community or as individual members, with community agencies that serve refugees and asylum seekers, donate money and resources, engage in advocacy in the public sphere.

A recent survey by the New Mainers Task Force of Maine Episcopalians showed that there are many needs within New Mainer communities and many ways to support and assist them.

Needs identified by the New Mainer communities include:

English instruction, housing deposits, disability support, friendship/mentoring, meeting space, assistance with professional/educational credentialing, utilities, food, clothing, employment, transportation, household items, furniture, computers/cell phones.

Organization to support:

Catholic Charities of Maine <https://www.ccmaine.org/refugee-immigration-services>

Immigration Legal Aid Project ILAP www.ilapmaine.org

*Hopeful Links - support for unaccompanied minors in Maine - Contact Lucky Hollander at lucky.hollander@gmail.com

*Trinity Jubilee Center in Lewiston www.trinityjubileecenter.org

*Tree Street Youth - services for children in Lewiston - www.treestreetyouth.org

*St. Elizabeth's Essentials Pantry based at St. Luke's Cathedral in Portland

<http://stlukesportland.org/pages/general/st-elizabeths>

*St. Mark's Outreach Ministries - a range of programs that serve people in Augusta including newly arrived families from Iraq and other war-torn countries <http://twoonine.org/ministries/>

*Compassionate Housing Initiative in Yarmouth, offering temporary housing for newly arrived Mainers, <http://www.uuyarmouth.org/justicework-refugees.php>

Mano en Mano - supporting migrant agricultural workers in Washington County

<http://www.manomaine.org/>

**recent awardee of a grant from one of the following diocesan funding sources: New Initiative Fund, Domestic Poverty Grants, Bishop's Discretionary Fund,*

News stories and online resources

<http://www.pressherald.com/2017/03/12/churches-discuss-becoming-sanctuaries-for-undocumented-immigrants/>

<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/29/512072151/sanctuary-churches-who-control-the-story>

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/02/01/episcopal-church-stands-with-refugees-immigrants-and-the-undocumented/>

<http://www.dailynews.com/social-affairs/20170318/how-some-churches-are-preparing-to-offer-lit-eral-sanctuary-to-fight-trumps-policies>

<http://religionnews.com/2017/03/19/analysis-new-sanctuary-movement/>

<https://www.nhepiscopalnews.org/blog/2017/4/4/guest-blog-the-greatest-commandment-is-neve-r-easy>

Welcome signs in three languages for free linked at “Welcome Your Neighbor” Facebook page or <https://www.welcomeyourneighbors.org/order-signs>

Resources from Episcopal Migration Ministries

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2017/04/04/trumps-immigration-policies-force-reduction-o-f-episcopal-churchs-refugee-resettlement-network/>

<https://vimeo.com/39648553> -- Video about allies

http://www.episcopalmigrationministries.org/learn_more/resources_for_churches.aspx

<http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Can-we-count-on-you-.html?soid=1120909577537&aid=093UjOeVLq8> (liturgical resources and more)

PDF of powerpoint on EMM shared at the House of Bishops

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/19179943/HoB%20Presentation%20-%20EMM%20-%20Dis-tributed.pdf>