

Physical Sanctuary at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville (UUCA)

Final Report - Prepared by Venny Zachritz

Introduction

In January 2017, after the election of Donald Trump, UUCA Associate Minister Rev. Lisa Bovee-Kemper held a meeting within the UUCA congregation to determine if there was a desire to become a sanctuary congregation. At the initial meeting there were 24 people present from the congregation and from that group the Sanctuary Working Group (SWG) was formed.

The purpose of the SWG was to complete a feasibility study on the costs and risks of providing physical sanctuary, answer questions from the congregation, and prepare for a special congregational vote at UUCA which was held in October 2017.

The SWG determined that subgroups were required to complete the study and developed 5 subgroups deemed necessary to assess the risks of becoming a sanctuary congregation. These groups were the Western North Carolina (WNC) Sanctuary, Facilities, Legal, Programming Logistics and Public Relations.

Subgroup tasks:

- The WNC Sanctuary subgroup was tasked with communicating the requirements of providing physical sanctuary; training of volunteers on how to respond to the possibility of a visit from ICE; and contacting additional local faith communities to assess their support for physical sanctuary.
- The Facilities subgroup assessed the physical needs of the property and the demands of housing an undocumented immigrant for an extended period.
- The Legal subgroup investigated the liability and permitting requirements of housing an undocumented immigrant.
- The Programming Logistics subgroup was tasked with evaluating and assessing the church programming that was taking place at the location where the immigrant was to be housed. Based on their assessment some programming was moved to other UUCA locations and programming support from additional faith communities was verified.
- The Public Relations subgroup was tasked with providing information to the UUCA congregation about becoming a physical sanctuary and developing a statement for the media if required (see attached - UUCA Physical Sanctuary info sheet).

The SWG held monthly town hall meetings for the UUCA congregation to discuss and disseminate information developed by the sub-groups regarding the issues of being a sanctuary congregation.

Results of the SWG feasibility study:

- The SWG determined that the UUCA campus would be considered a “sensitive” location should there be an undocumented immigrant housed on campus. Being a “sensitive” location means that the risk of ICE entering the campus to remove an immigrant is minimal and therefore the legal risk is minimal.
- SWG received a pledge of support from 17 additional local faith communities. Support was identified as tangible (money and household items) and “boots on the ground” volunteers.

- Because the campus of UUCA includes a house that is primarily used for offices and meetings, SWG determined that housing an immigrant within the house would be relatively easy, cost-effective and minimally disruptive for the overall congregation and congregational work.

Necessary Sanctuary Support Roles

A special resolution to approve the role of UUCA as a sanctuary church was put forward to the congregation and passed in October 2017 (see attached - Resolution to Become a Sanctuary Congregation). As a result, the SWG was dissolved and the Sanctuary Steering Committee (SSC) formed, incorporating members from the SWG as well as members of other churches. Necessary sanctuary support roles, for both UUCA and the community, were determined and defined as such:

- **CIMA (Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Accion).** Western North Carolina's primary immigrant partner organization, CIMA connects, strengthens and organizes communities to act for immigrant rights in Western North Carolina. CIMA strives for inclusive communities with justice, freedom, and equality for all. Any undocumented immigrant needing sanctuary would arrive via notification from CIMA and CIMA would maintain communication with the immigrant and the SSC and assist as needed.
- **WNC Sanctuary Coalition.** The goal of the WNC Sanctuary Coalition, particularly the predominantly white religious communities, is to support the efforts of marginalized members of our community by amplifying the voices and the work of partner organizations and people directly impacted by these policies and laws. The larger group that supports the work of building Sanctuary culture in WNC, consists of at least two subgroups: a steering committee subgroup and a subgroup for outreach/education/communications. The outreach group planned events for education and cultural enrichment for the sanctuary-supporting churches and sanctuary churches. The Sanctuary Working Group became "Faith Communities Organizing for Sanctuary" in August 2018 and is still an active group.
- **Sanctuary Steering Committee.** The steering committee was responsible for oversight of the logistics and management of the site, including guest needs. They also organized/lead trainings for volunteer companions as needed and supported the Needs Coordination Team.
- **Volunteer Coordinators.** Volunteer coordinators were charged with maintaining a schedule for volunteer companions and responding to the needs of volunteers.
- **Needs Coordination Team.** The Needs Coordination Team consisted of fluent Spanish-speaking volunteers who were responsible for supporting the sanctuary guest and making sure their needs were met. A member of the team met weekly with the guest to assess upcoming needs (laundry, groceries, medical, etc.). A member of this team was also on call 24 hours a day. Needs coordinators were responsible for identifying needs and delegating them to the appropriate person/group.
- **Volunteer Companions.** To assist a guest with safety and security, it was recommended that the sanctuary site be staffed 24 hours a day by Volunteer Companions. The primary role of a Volunteer Companion was to provide hospitality and security for the sanctuary guest and family.

Sanctuary Process

In April 2018 UUCA received a call from CIMA that there was an undocumented immigrant in need of sanctuary and La Mariposa moved in. The SSC determined, for the safety of the guest and the Volunteer Companions, that her name would not be revealed and she chose the name La Mariposa or the

Butterfly. La Mariposa stayed in sanctuary for 8 months before going back to her home in December 2017 while her immigration appeal is being processed. During Mariposa's stay, Rev. Mark Ward was in periodic contact with her lawyer George Pappas regarding her status. It was through this communication that Mariposa's son, lawyer and Rev. Ward were able to meet with Sen. Thom Tillis and determine that there was no standing deportation order for her removal from the country.

An electronic sign-up system using Sign-Up Genius was developed to recruit volunteers. There were around 200 volunteers from the 17 faith communities, Peace Corps volunteers, and the community that signed up to sit with Mariposa. Volunteer Companions were required 24/7, sitting for a 4-hour slot during the day and 12 hours overnight.

To provide consistency and safety for sanctuary guests and Volunteer Companions, a comprehensive Volunteer Manual was developed (see attached Volunteer Manual). This manual was developed with the help of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Sanctuary Toolkit and through discussions with other sanctuary congregations around the country. Each volunteer was given an electronic copy of the manual and a hard copy was made available in the sanctuary host room.

Items needed to support Mariposa were requested and donated. These items included a bed, recliner for Volunteer Companions, computer, printer, phone, security doorbell system, sewing machines and fabric, washer and dryer, TV and DVD player, food, eye glasses, money and grocery gift cards.

During Mariposa's stay she also received pastoral support from Rev. Brent Norris of St. Mary's Episcopal Church and Father Pat Cahill from St. Eugene's Catholic Church. Both visited her regularly and offered her communion and spiritual support. Mariposa also regularly attended Sunday services at UUCA, participated in the choir and spoke with the congregation with her remarks being interpreted by UUCA Faith Development Minister Rev. Claudia Jiménez.

Lessons Learned

- Recruiting and filling volunteer companion slots would have been impossible without volunteer support from many local faith communities. The members of the SSC and the Volunteer Coordinators were tremendously helpful fulfilling this constant need for volunteers.
- Training volunteers and staff about a potential ICE visit to the sanctuary site is essential. The SSC held several trainings during the period that there was a sanctuary guest. Training provided information to volunteers on how to handle an emergency so that they would be comfortable while staying with Mariposa.
- Several medical issues arose while Mariposa was in sanctuary. Because of the risk of transporting her from sanctuary to a medical facility, two Spanish-speaking physicians were recruited to assist with her medical needs. These physicians would then relay information to the Needs Coordination Team to ensure that Mariposa's medical needs were addressed. The physicians met with Mariposa weekly.
- Mariposa had special dietary needs so to maintain a consistent supply of the correct type of foods to meet her dietary needs, only 2 volunteers were recruited to shop for her. Having a minimum number of shoppers reduced food waste and maintained diet consistency.
- There were times when weather became an issue and a risk for both Mariposa and the Volunteer Companions traveling to the site. When this occurred, Mariposa was secretly

removed from sanctuary and transported to a “safe house” or a member of the SSC would stay in sanctuary for the duration of the storm.

- During the first 2-3 months of sanctuary, Mariposa showed signs of depression. It was difficult for her to get outside and exercise. A sewing machine was given to Mariposa and she was taught how to sew. Her items were then sold at various supporting faith communities. Consequently, Mariposa developed a skill and earned money to contribute to her bills at her house.
- Having bilingual volunteers available is an asset. Several times there were perceived emergencies due to the language barrier between Mariposa and only English speaking Volunteer Companions. This issue was resolved with the help of the Needs Coordination Team’s bilingual volunteers.
- Volunteer burnout was a problem within 3 months of taking in Mariposa. Notes of encouragement and regular updates to volunteers helped to keep up the flow of volunteers. Also updates to the supporting faith communities helped in recruiting additional volunteers.

Special Considerations

When Mariposa decided to enter sanctuary she requested anonymity and stated that she did not want any attention directed towards her and her decision to stay in sanctuary. Therefore no public announcement was made to the media about her status. The SSC also asked that all Volunteer Companions not talk about sanctuary or Mariposa outside of sanctuary. The Volunteer Companions only knew Mariposa by her “secret” name and we asked that they respect her desire to remain anonymous. Because we decided on anonymity and media silence there was no negative public outcries against sanctuary which, we feel, greatly diminished the stress of having a guest in sanctuary.

Another point to consider are the ways to handle medical issues when a guest is undocumented. Mariposa entered sanctuary with several medical problems including physical, dental and vision problems. She did not have insurance to cover any of her costs and she needed medicine, glasses and dental work while she stayed with us. The SSC requested and received donations for medicine, her glasses and dental work, but Mariposa has had to incur the costs of the doctor visits and medical tests. Medical needs were, understandably, a huge area of concern and how to resolve a potential medical needs should be considered and reviewed before an individual is taken into sanctuary.

Conclusion

The decision to become a physical sanctuary site should not be approached lightly or rapidly. Providing for the safety of an immigrant seeking sanctuary and the safety of the volunteers willing to stay with an immigrant is a huge endeavor. UUCA Sanctuary Working Group decided early in the process that without support and assistance from a coalition of faith communities and local Latinx leaders, providing physical sanctuary would be difficult at best. Having completed the feasibility study in advance of deciding on physical sanctuary provided the necessary road map to successfully house an immigrant for an extended period.

Continuous communication between the sanctuary guest, volunteers, members of the Sanctuary Steering Committee, and the supporting faith communities provided transparency throughout her stay. Mariposa’s needs were met in a timely fashion; she received much support and companionship from the volunteers; and every volunteer was able to feel that they were helping in a needed area.

The benefits of involving a coalition of faith communities to support an immigrant in sanctuary cannot be understated. The different faith communities were willing to help recruit volunteers and provide monetary and emotional support to Mariposa during the time that she stayed at UUCA. Although providing sanctuary to an undocumented immigrant is a risk, everyone that was involved with this process and with Mariposa felt that the risk was worth the effort.