

Sanctuary churches vow to shield immigrants from possible crackdown

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When Javier Flores, a 40-year-old father of three, received an order to surrender to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, he fled to Arch Street United Methodist Church. He said he is determined to stay in the United States for the sake of his children.

The north Philadelphia resident, who has no criminal convictions, entered the United States from Mexico without papers in 1997. Since then, he has been deported and reentered several times.

“Today and every day, if Javier and his family choose to stay with us, they will have a home with us,” said Robin Hynicka, senior pastor of the Arch Street church, on November 15.

During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump vowed to deport an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants. After his victory, he said he would immediately deport 2 to 3 million who have been convicted of crimes.

In the wake of the election, there has been an “outpouring of inquiries and support” from congregations across the country that want to sign on as sanctuary sites, said Peter Pedemonti, executive director of the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia.

“Churches are saying, ‘We want to do this. How do we get started?’” said Pedemonti, whose coalition includes 17 churches and two synagogues that have banded together to oppose deportations and offer their buildings as safe havens.

Since 2014, 13 churches in nine cities have provided sanctuary to 15 people at risk of imminent deportation, said Noel Andersen, national grassroots coordinator for Church World Service, which provides legal services for immigrants. He estimated there are 400 congregations nationwide that support the efforts or are willing to open their doors to people fearing repatriation.

Churches, along with schools and hospitals, are considered “sensitive locations” by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. That means federal agents avoid arresting, searching, or interviewing people there under most circumstances.

The sanctuary tradition can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible. The book of Numbers cites six sanctuary cities throughout biblical Israel where a person who accidentally killed another could take refuge from anyone avenging the killing.

A more recent version is the American sanctuary church movement of the 1980s, in which hundreds of Central American refugees sought shelter in churches to avoid deportation.

In the current iteration, houses of worship are joined by urban mayors, as well as colleges and universities, declaring that they will protect undocumented immigrants from deportation.

Christians in today’s political climate are mixed on the question of immigration reform. While some evangelical groups such as the Evangelical Immigration Table have championed immigration reform, their efforts have not led to movement on the national level.

The major Hispanic evangelical organizations have advocated for comprehensive immigration reform but have not joined the sanctuary movement.

“Churches need to follow their conscience,” said Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition. “If they feel they need to protect undocumented immigrants, they’re within their biblical and theological right to do so. But the real preference is immigration reform. Sanctuary churches are a response. It’s not the answer.”

Tony Suarez, executive vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which with 40,118 participating churches is the largest Hispanic evangelical association in the country, serves on Trump’s Evangelical Executive Advisory Board.

“What we have been seeking is a true change in the system,” Suarez said. “All this is a result of a broken system.”

He said the advisory board has been meeting with the president-elect or his advisers on a weekly basis and that their immigration policy is “still evolving.” He added the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference will advocate for “justice and mercy” for all undocumented people.

Although U.S. Catholic bishops urged Trump to adopt humane policies toward immigrants and refugees, not all bishops advocate for sanctuary churches.

Mainline churches, more liberal Catholic churches, and Jewish synagogues, however, are expected to join the movement and open their doors to people seeking refuge.

“It’s really key that people of faith be active, especially white America,” said Hynicka, of Arch Street United Methodist. “It’s time to put your bodies, buildings, and assets on the line.” —Religion News Service

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