

Open to children

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue



The entrance of an 800-year-old church in Monteriggioni, Italy. [Some rights reserved](#) by [sramses177](#)

It's rare that a politician says something memorable. Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts said something that I haven't been able to forget when he proposed that our state offer shelter to a thousand children who crossed into the United States to escape violence and poverty in their home countries. Massachusetts once sheltered refugees from Hurricane Katrina in military barracks on Cape Cod; Governor Patrick has proposed that the state offer the same shelter to children arriving at the border.

The governor's proposal received a mixed response: some people called his office to offer books, toys, and time to help care for the children. Others, including some residents of the communities in which the governor proposed housing the children, strongly opposed the idea. We don't want illegal immigrants in our communities, they said. We moved to Cape Cod to get away from problems like these. Send those children back where they came from.

Accompanied by local leaders of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, the governor held a press conference to explain why he wanted to bring the children to Massachusetts, and he cast his decision as a response to the demands of faith. He quoted lines from the Hebrew Bible in which God commands us to welcome the stranger as we have been welcomed. He reminded us that in 1939 the United States failed to shelter Jewish children from Europe, to our lasting shame. And then, his voice breaking, he said, “I don’t know what good there is in faith, if we can’t or won’t turn to it in times of human need.”

There is no disputing that this is a time of human need. The reporting on why the children are fleeing their home countries has been so sparse. But my sister, who spent years getting children released from detention centers on the southern border of our country, tells me that children who make the dangerous journey north risk their lives to escape kidnapping, rape, hunger, forced conscription into gangs, sex trafficking, murder, slavery, and poverty. Their situation is as grave as is possible to imagine, terrible enough for those who love them to send them north in the hopes that they can reach the border. To say that these children have broken the law and should be “sent home” obscures the consequences of deportation.

What good is there in faith, the governor asked, if we can’t and won’t turn to it in moments of human need?

What does it mean to “turn to faith”? At the end of June, the Supreme Court exempted Hobby Lobby from the federal health care law which mandates that employers cover contraception for their employees. At the same time some religious leaders were pleading with the president to exempt religious organizations from a new federal law forbidding hiring discrimination against LGBT people.

In summer school we were reading stories in which religious faith was depicted as a force powerful enough to turn our lives inside out and set us on unexpected paths: the stories of Abraham and Moses, the tale of the quest for the Holy Grail, the life of the Buddha. By contrast, the recent developments made religious faith sound frail and fragile, something that required protection and exemption, a border that needed patrolling.

Is this what it means to “turn to faith”—gathering in the like-minded and barring the door against all else? Or is turning to faith a riskier move outward, a crossing of borders, an opening of doors? As the governor seemed to say, we need faith not to

confirm our prejudices—we can manage that all by ourselves—but to move beyond them. In order to do what faith requires, we need faith in each other, faith in God, and faith in the visions of beloved community that our religious traditions have passed down from generation to generation.

It's risky for the governor to urge us to turn to our faith, because once we begin turning there's no telling how far our faith will ask us to go. The governor proposed housing the children for the month before their deportation hearings. But is a month enough time to create an environment in which traumatized children can find a voice to tell their stories? Is it enough time to listen and to understand? We may find that our faith urges us beyond temporary care toward advocacy.

Some opponents of the governor's plan argued that we shouldn't care for undocumented children before we care for our own. Yes, there are children in our communities who are also facing danger. But if we turn to our faith, we might learn that honoring the human dignity of children is not a zero-sum game in which caring for one child makes it impossible to care for another. We can care for all of these children, but we will have to change our lives and our world.

Our faith does not exempt us. It makes a claim on us and asks us to turn.