

UUCGL Sanctuary FAQs

December, 2018

What is sanctuary?

Physical sanctuary is an act of civil disobedience, in which a church, mosque, temple or other house of worship offers shelter inside its building to a person facing persecution. It has a long history going back hundreds of years. In our instance, we are talking about individuals being persecuted by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and facing deportation from the United States.

What is special about a house of worship?

As a matter of policy, ICE regards houses of worship as a “sensitive location” that it will not enter in order to apprehend someone. However, policies are not legally binding and can change without notice. It is the moral authority of churches and not their legal standing that makes them safe places to seek refuge.

Moreover, it is only the interior of the church building that is considered a “sensitive location” under ICE policy. Other church property or parsonages do not offer the same protection.

What do the terms Tier 1 and Tier 2 sanctuary church mean?

A Tier 1 church is one that is actually prepared to or is currently housing a guest. A Tier 2 church is one that has committed to providing support to Tier 1 churches. UUCGL is discussing becoming a Tier 1 church. There are approximately ten Tier 2 churches in Essex County. These churches do not have the physical space to offer sanctuary.

Why do people need sanctuary?

People need sanctuary from ICE because deportation can have catastrophic and even fatal consequences for themselves and their families. Undocumented immigrants who live in “mixed-status” families (those with US citizen children who were born in this country) face permanent separation from their loved ones if they are deported. In addition, criminal networks prey on recent deportees from the US because they are perceived as having access to resources. Deportation can literally lead to death. Offering sanctuary can save lives.

Importantly, sanctuary only applies to people who have already had an immigration court proceeding and have received a deportation order. Sanctuary does not apply to the millions of undocumented people living in this country who have not come to the attention of ICE or been targeted for deportation.

Why should UUCGL choose to offer sanctuary?

Faith: As a community we are called to action to uphold our principles when we see injustice in the world. Offering physical sanctuary is a representation of our faith in action and an act of civil disobedience against unjust laws that adversely affect our neighbors.

Resources: UUCGL has the physical space to accommodate people in sanctuary. We have an underutilized downstairs that could be converted to a living area and an outdoor courtyard in the center of the church which individuals could freely use without the fear of being “outside” the church. In addition, we have the financial resources to address potential issues that may arise.

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Making the Circle Wider: This act will build upon our vision of ministry to engage with people outside our doors—other faith traditions, immigrant communities in Lynn and their advocates, as well as other communities under siege. The physical act of sanctuary can be very meaningful for congregants—sometimes more so than the person in sanctuary!

Why do you say “offer” sanctuary?

Some churches that have created sanctuary space that remains unoccupied. Being in sanctuary can be described as self-imprisonment. The potential guest is choosing to limit his or her movement within the walls of one building. Depending on the location, the person may be isolated from neighbors and family.

Can anyone with a deportation order come to UUCGL and enter sanctuary?

At the very least there must be a plausible avenue for relief from deportation if a person is to enter sanctuary. However, even if we become a sanctuary congregation, that does not mean we are committed to offering sanctuary to any person who requests it. UUCGL, like all churches, can choose to adopt whatever guidelines it thinks best in terms of assessing the appropriateness of a given individual and case. The Essex County Community Organization (ECCO) and others will help guide us through this process.

How many people might enter sanctuary? How long might they stay?

Based on other churches' experiences and simple logistics, it is likely that the church would host an individual or at most a small family unit (a parent and small child). Sanctuary lasts as long as it takes to convince ICE that the case is no longer worth pursuing. In most of the cases since 2014 it has taken people an average of 9 months to secure relief. We should expect a stay of up to a year and a half.

Does this work?

Since 2014, all but one of the 18 deportation orders against individuals in church sanctuary were dropped, and the remaining case is still pending. This model has a proven track record of success.

Is the person in sanctuary in hiding?

Once someone enters sanctuary, ICE will be notified of their whereabouts. The purpose is not to hide someone, but to assist them in their immigration proceedings and call attention to the unjust system.

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Can the church or anyone at the church be charged with harboring a fugitive or otherwise be held legally accountable?

While the Immigration and Nationality Act forbids “harboring” a person who does not have legal permission to be in the US, this provision is seldom enforced and has never been enforced against anyone who is assisting an undocumented immigrant with obtaining legal status. In the history of sanctuary movement to date, no church, minister, or lay leader has ever been prosecuted on this basis.

Could the church be sued? Could they revoke our non-profit status?

There is no precedent for a lawsuit on this basis. However, if ICE or any other entity attempted to do this, our ECCO partners have resources to help fight any such action.

Would we speak to local police and politicians about our plans? What is the attitude of the Swampscott Police Department around sanctuary?

If we choose to offer sanctuary, we will engage with town officials. We do not know their attitudes regarding sanctuary at this time. We must achieve consensus as a congregation before we will be able to approach the Swampscott Board of Selectmen or the fire or police chiefs about our plans.

Where would someone live while in the church building? What changes would we need to make to the building to create a livable space?

Initial discussions lean toward using the lower level where there is already a half bath and small kitchenette. It seems to be the easiest and most private location to renovate and to comfortably house a guest, with a full bath and washer/dryer. We will also need space to accommodate overnight volunteers. The guest will also have access to the rest of the church.

How much will renovations cost?

Though we don't have a figure yet, ECCO has grant money available to help with the costs. We will also look for donations of time and new items (TV, washer, dryer, linens, etc).

Why do all this work for just one person? Why not buy a building in Lynn and house people there?

For that one person in sanctuary this work is incredibly meaningful and important, and it is the church building itself that lends itself to some layer of protection. Let us consider the spiritual power of opening our doors to those seeking safety. Many have observed over the years that our church only gives out money, and sanctuary provides an opportunity to engage all of our assets—our church, our faith and our community.

Does the person in sanctuary have to join the church?

Our guest would be welcome to participate in any church event within the building or not, whichever he or she decides.

Can a person in sanctuary ever leave the church building?

Since those in sanctuary are at risk of apprehension and deportation everywhere but the church building, the assumption should be that they will not leave the church for any length of time until the case against them is closed.

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What would be the volunteer needs to support someone living in sanctuary?

Since the individual cannot leave without risk of arrest, UUCGL and ECCO congregations must take responsibility for providing daily needs, including groceries, medical, dental and mental health services. We will also provide opportunities for social interactions: sharing meals, visiting, hosting game nights, and others. Two volunteers will be in the building 24 hours a day to assist our guest and to be a first line of defense/communication if ICE should attempt to enter the church. A multi-church team will oversee the volunteer efforts. Paid staff will have their normal hours and responsibilities.

Could being a sanctuary church attract aggression from the alt-right? Will extra security be needed?

Though we don't know how the community (and beyond) will respond to any act of civil disobedience, we will have resources to plan for potential scenarios. The need for additional security measures will be evaluated as part of this process. Currently, entry outside of worship time requires an electronic key, and cameras watch the front door. UU Church of Bedford, on the other hand, leaves its doors unlocked during the day and has no cameras.

What happens if ICE shows up at the church?

There are written protocols that other churches have developed to plan for this unlikely occurrence. While we cannot legally stop ICE from entering the church, volunteers will confirm that any ICE documentation is legitimate and if so, to act as a witness if they enter the church and arrest our guest. Volunteers would also contact others to inform them of what is transpiring.

What if neighbors object?

The change on a day-to-day basis in terms of visitor traffic will be negligible. Neighbors should not notice any difference, and maybe will even support us.

Has UUCGL considered its history of embracing a cause and later losing interest?

What makes this opportunity different is that we are not doing this alone. ECCO and many other churches will be assisting with resources, enthusiasm, and many hands.

Does a congregation have to be unanimous in its decision to provide sanctuary?

The vote to become a sanctuary church would take place under the normal meeting procedures as detailed in the church bylaws. As with any major church decision, the Board of Trustees and the Minister will take into consideration the vote to determine next steps.

How can we address inherent bias and institutional racism within our own church community?

ECCO offers educational programs related to racism and white privilege, and some church members have offered to host similar programs at UUCGL.

How can I get involved in sanctuary work now?

You might consider volunteering your time at the Bedford UU church, which is currently offering sanctuary to a guest. Interested people can contact members of the LUUP team to learn when the next volunteer training will be offered at the Bedford UU church.

This frequently asked questions document is greatly indebted to a similar document provided by the Bedford Unitarian Universalist Church.