

Sanctuary churches, cities may face consequences from federal authorities

Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ in Buffalo, New York, consulted lawyers before deciding to join the sanctuary movement and offer shelter to undocumented people. When it came time for the vote in the congregation of about 110 people, it was unanimous.

"No one blinked," said Justo Gonzalez II, the church's pastor.

The legality of congregations housing undocumented people to keep them from immigration authorities is unclear.

"We do not want to be bad citizens; we do not want to violate the law," Gonzalez said. "But we will stand on the side of justice, and we will stand on our faith and God's law and our understanding that we are to welcome our brothers and sisters."

Participation in the sanctuary movement surged in recent months, doubling from 400 to 800 U.S. congregations, according to Church World Service, which offers immigrants legal assistance and helps organize the sanctuary movement. The movement includes Christians, Jews, Muslims, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, and more.

While some congregations offer physical sanctuary, others provide funds, food, clothing, or legal assistance. But it is the congregations that shelter undocumented immigrants that take the legal risks. And that has some religious leaders preaching caution.

In Chicago, Cardinal Blase Cupich told priests that Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials may not enter churches without a warrant, yet he also reminded priests that only they may live on church property.

Bryan Pham, a Jesuit priest and professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, outlined legal points churches should consider before becoming a sanctuary congregation:

- There is no legal definition or standing for a claim of sanctuary, so housing an undocumented immigrant in a house of worship is a violation of federal law.
- Congregations can't claim that harboring an undocumented immigrant is an

expression of their First Amendment right to free exercise of religion.

- Claiming a house of worship as a sanctuary and housing people inside it could be a violation of local ordinances, which may give law enforcement officials probable cause to obtain a warrant for a search and possible arrests.
- Labeling a house of worship a sanctuary "may give a false sense of safety," Pham told *National Catholic Reporter*. "If you declare yourself a sanctuary, you're implying you can provide legal and other protection. And that's not true."

To date, ICE officials have not entered any churches to conduct a raid, though they did stake out a church-run homeless shelter in Virginia and arrested people as they emerged. In the 1980s, some church leaders in several states who sheltered some 2,000 undocumented immigrants from war-torn Central America were tried and convicted but were not given jail sentences.

Today, immigration experts say ICE will likely refrain from entering a church—deemed a "sensitive location," along with schools and hospitals, by the Department of Homeland Security—because the act would be a public relations nightmare.

At Pilgrim-St. Luke's in Buffalo, the church officially opened its doors to undocumented people with an announcement in local media in February. Gonzalez declined to say whether the church is housing anyone.

"I can say, when there have been rumors of ICE activity and Border Patrol activity we have opened up the church and people have come and we have spent the day with them, fed them, and provided them a safe and sacred space," he said.

Should ICE come to the church, its employees are ready, Gonzalez said. They have been trained in the proper protocol and their legal rights: ICE officials must present a warrant and the name of who they are looking for.

"We no longer just buzz people into the building," Gonzalez said. "We have to know who you are and why you are here. We are doing the best we can to protect ourselves and stand firm that



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE REV. JUSTO GONZALEZ II

SAFE SPACE: A man opens gifts of winter clothing at Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ in Buffalo, New York, on December 24. The congregation recently joined the sanctuary movement, agreeing to offer shelter to people facing deportation.

this is holy ground that we will not allow to be violated."

President Trump signed an executive order to deny funding to cities that refuse to share immigration status information with ICE and to detain undocumented immigrants who commit nonviolent crimes.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions ramped up threats to sanctuary cities in late March, saying the government would take "all lawful steps to claw back" federal funding awarded to cities that do not fully comply with federal immigration enforcement.

"I urge the nation's states and cities to carefully consider the harm they are doing to their citizens by refusing to enforce our immigration laws," he said, speaking at a press briefing.

The funding threats to sanctuary cities are not entirely new. Last year, the Obama administration said cities which failed to comply with federal immigration law put themselves at risk of losing funding.

But local law enforcement in cities around the nation say that refusing to hold nonviolent, minor offenders until

immigration agents arrive helps to bolster a healthy relationship between police and minority communities, which in turn results in a higher rate of reporting crimes and makes it easier to speak with witnesses who do not have legal documentation.

Dozens of U.S. cities and towns consider themselves sanctuary cities.

[In Santa Fe, New Mexico, the city council voted to become a sanctuary city in February after advocacy from local churches such as United Church of Santa Fe. Allegra Love, an immigration attorney who attends the church, told United Church News: "Sanctuary does not keep ICE out of a city, and we need to all be ready to protect our neighbors from raids and arrests."]—Kimberly Winston, Religion News Service; Amanda Hoover, *The Christian Science Monitor*

St. Louis Episcopalians act against gun violence as homicide rate spikes

St. Louis is being called America's murder capital after a recent spike in gun violence, making the city the site of more killings per capita than any other major U.S. city.

The 188 killings last year prompted a renewed focus, including by the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, on the causes and possible solutions of such violence.

"One death is too many," said Marc Smith, who last year became the bishop's deputy for gun violence prevention. But developing a plan of response defies easy answers.

"Looking for the elegant, simple solution is wrong," he said. "It is an incredibly complex problem."

One of Smith's tasks is to help 36 community organizations coordinate more effectively on the issue of gun violence. He's also trying to mobilize Episcopalians at the parish level to work toward a tangible first goal: giving away gun locks to gun owners.

Accidental shootings and suicides often are overlooked in the debate over gun violence, Smith said, but this danger



PHOTO BY WOMEN'S VOICES RAISED

PREVENTING SHOOTINGS: Barbara Finch (right) of Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice demonstrates a gun lock to a man who stopped at the Lock It for Love booth at an event in October. Episcopalians in St. Louis have increased efforts against gun violence, including partnering with Lock It for Love.

is "probably the easiest to solve." The diocese recently began a partnership with Washington University's School of Medicine and a group called Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice to support the group's Lock It for Love initiative.

Lock It for Love aims to reduce the frequency of suicides and accidental shootings by children by distributing gun locks for free. Since April 2015, Women's Voices Raised has given out about 1,500 gun locks to families, mostly at health fairs and similar events, President Lise Bernstein said.

"Sometimes the issue of gun violence can just seem overwhelming and frustrating and depressing," Bernstein said. The focus on gun locks was a way to rally the community around a hands-on solution to one slice of the larger problem.

Bernstein and Smith also share the belief that gun violence should be tackled as a public health issue, an approach that draws on Smith's experience as a health-care administrator.

Smith, who grew up in the St. Louis area, began serving as a priest in 2011 at the Church of the Ascension on St. Louis's North Side. About six months into the job, he attended the wake and funeral of a woman who was killed in a

drive-by shooting. It was a scene he would witness again and again.

"The sense of desperation and hopelessness and powerlessness is crippling," he said.

Much national attention has been focused on Chicago, which recorded the most total homicides in 2016 with more than 760. [Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago launched an antiviolence initiative in early April, including a Good Friday stations of the cross procession remembering murder victims.]

Smaller cities like St. Louis, Detroit, and New Orleans have suffered from even higher rates of homicide per capita. St. Louis recorded nearly 60 homicides per 100,000 people last year.

The national murder rate has risen over the past two years, and the possible causes, from gang activity to policing policies, are hotly debated.

At the local level, gun violence prevention often emphasizes the practical. In St. Louis, for example, there is a group of black clergy known as "homicide ministers" who reach out to victims' families, attend funerals, and provide assistance as needed. The Episcopal diocese is developing a plan to partner with the ministers.