

## Sanctuary Exploration Team Actions in Historical Context

“Sanctuary” —the act providing refuge for persons whose lives are unjustly threatened – is a practice within the Judeo-Christian tradition that dates back through the Middle Ages to Old Testament times. This tradition was reborn during the mid-1980’s, when the Southside Presbyterian Church of Tucson, Arizona, began a movement among faith groups of offering safe havens and other assistance to people who were fleeing military strife in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The movement spread to Madison, and Covenant became involved. I wasn’t at Covenant during this time, but from reading about it in the history of Covenant, Sojourners in Faith, I gather it was a contentious issue. After lengthy deliberation, “decently and in good order,” Covenant donated \$3,000 to help set up an off-site sanctuary with other Madison churches --- on a congregational vote of 76 in favor, 64 opposed, and one abstaining.

Over the past several years, a new sanctuary movement has been emerging in the United States in response to what many see as cruel and unjust efforts to deport undocumented persons who have been living in, and contributing to American society for years. Nation-wide, hundreds of churches have joined this movement.

In April, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly PC(USA) issued a letter to the church, in which he said: “Loving our neighbors has always been a radical idea, and one we need constant reminder to realize. In their time of strife and living in fear, what is required of us when 11 million of our neighbors are at risk of deportation? In this time and place, how are we called to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?”

Locally, a number of churches and other organizations have formed the Dane Sanctuary Coalition to support undocumented persons who are at risk of imminent deportation. Their goal is not to hide illegal immigrants from law enforcement, but, rather, to give support and physical refuge to persons who face the threat of imminent deportation, and who have a strong case to defer or stop deportation, so that they will have the opportunity for due process. Six Congregations, worshiping at three locations have offered their facilities as physical sanctuaries.

At Covenant, a “Sanctuary Exploration Team,” led by Pastor Jeff, has begun looking into whether Covenant should join the Dane Sanctuary Coalition and offer our building as a sanctuary for undocumented individuals facing imminent deportation. Guided by Covenant’s motto, “Learning, Loving, Living,” we are planning multiple opportunities for Covenant members to learn about the issues and participate in decision-making process.

This is an opportunity for us a community of faith to deliberate together – to “discern” – what our faith calls us to do. There will be disagreements, as there were 30-plus years ago, but we can strive to have an open, frank, respectful, loving dialogue on this issue to determine what action we should take.