



Kenny Jones

Support and Sanctuary: Emerson UU Church Houston TX

Project Goal

At the December 2017 annual congregational meeting, Emerson UU Church Houston, by congregational vote, will approve a proposal to join the Sanctuary 2014 Movement as a sanctuary congregation and on or before December 31, 2018. The congregation will be in a position to offer sanctuary to a qualifying asylum seeker facing deportation under the guidelines established by the UUA sanctioned Sanctuary 2014 initiative.

Personal Reflection

Participation in the JBI program has had a significant impact on me personally and as a congregational leader. The process of developing a bold and complex project and then setting out to see it realized has forced me to temper my impatience to make a genuine attempt to not only listen, but value those perspectives that differ from my own. It has taught me humility and a deeper appreciation of others' inherent worth and dignity. The process of working on such a project has forced a careful examination of the complexity of the operations of a vibrant community and the high level of patience and mutual understanding necessary to build a sense of community around something that represents a bold step for our congregation. I have experienced both a widening and deepening of my UU identity.

Project Update

In furtherance of the project goals to provide cohesion and a common sense of purpose among the various social justice activities present in our congregation, to elevate our congregation's standing in the community on the issues of refugee and immigrant justice, and to move our congregation to participate in the Sanctuary Movement by formally electing to become a sanctuary congregation; a campaign or initiative of education, advocacy, and service called Project Refugee has been set in motion. Important milestones in this process have been the formation of a member cohort committed to these goals, "institutionalization" of the campaign/initiative in terms of Religious Education and film screening offerings, and exploration of opportunities for our congregation to engage in both advocacy and service opportunities on refugee and immigration justice.

The formation of the cohort has included both success and setbacks. Our Board of Trustees President called for the formation of a task force comprised of church "leaders" to explore the question of becoming a sanctuary congregation. Unfortunately, that process has been slowed due to difficulty in getting those willing to engage in the process to meet. This, coupled with the

summer “lull” in activity, had led to the postponement of the task force effort until our normal church year resumes in September. On the positive side, a key ally has been secured in the leader of our congregation’s immigrant outreach effort who is fully on board with the goals of Project Refugee. Several productive meetings have been held to coordinate a process to achieve mutual goals.

In terms of the effort to “institutionalize” project issues into the religious education and social action fabric of our church, one Sunday per month has been formerly devoted to Project Refugee’s goals. Despite the summer lull, attendance and participation has been encouraging (average 20 participants) in terms of a seven week Immigration Justice Adult Religious Education program that is currently half completed. In addition, over these past months a number of contacts have been established with organizations in the refugee services and resettlement community that are eager to form a relationship with Project Refugee. Efforts are underway to establish a team willing to formally sponsor a refugee family beginning in October, 2016.

These efforts have been somewhat compromised with the coinciding sabbatical of our co-ministers and the aforementioned summer lull in both attendance and participation. Over the next 2 months, our goal is to complete the formation of the Project Refugee cohort through a series of one to one conversations with potential key allies. Overall, I am pleased with the progress towards realization of my JBI goals and anticipate significant project progress over the next three to six months.