

To: The seven covenanted congregations of the Berkshire Sanctuary Network

First Church of Christ on Park Square, Pittsfield

First Congregational Church, Williamstown

Lee Congregational Church, Lee

South Congregational Church, Pittsfield

St. John's Episcopal Church, Williamstown

St. Stephen's Congregational Church, Pittsfield

Unitarian Universalist Church, Pittsfield

Since the BIO Sanctuary Working Group was founded in November 2017, the participants have worked to set up a physical space in a building owned by one of BIOs member congregations. Using the model developed by other congregations throughout the US, the space would be used to house an immigrant under immediate threat of deportation but with a strong case for challenging deportation. This sanctuary space would aid not only the person housed there, but the community of immigrants by shedding a light on our broken immigration system. Publicity about the individual would highlight the plight of undocumented immigrants throughout the country. A network of supporting BIO congregations would address the legal, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the individual housed in sanctuary.

Given the challenges of COVID-19, we have been unable to establish a physical space to serve as a sanctuary. However, we have something even more valuable, a network of seven BIO member congregations pledged to welcome immigrants and to work with them for justice. All the congregations endorsed covenants similar to the one attached. The covenants describe a broad mission of support for immigrants going beyond the creation of a physical sanctuary. We need to refocus our energy on this broader purpose.

The Sanctuary Team has recently resumed meeting to address the broader topic of immigrant justice. As an initial step toward support for immigrant justice we began working with an informal community of local Spanish speakers who meet weekly over Zoom, Cafecito. Dondei introduced members of the Sanctuary Team to the group and translated for us. Team members attended several sessions, introducing themselves and learning about Cafecito members' concerns. We also asked them to describe their understanding of the meaning of sanctuary. They described sanctuary as an emotional and spiritual space where people found unqualified support and freedom to express any ideas or concerns. They did not speak about a physical space.

Right now, the Cafecito group is particularly concerned about schooling. In Pittsfield, plans for education during the pandemic are available only in English. The group identified six points which they wanted the Pittsfield School System to address. Members of the Sanctuary Team attended both a planning session and a Zoom meeting with a member of the school committee. After a meeting with the Superintendent's representative, the district provided the translated slides from an English-only back-to-school presentation. The group is currently negotiating with the schools on the implementation of the six points. Sanctuary Team members followed the lead of the Cafecito community, supporting and amplifying their demands.

This may be a model for ongoing work. As representatives of the covenanted congregations of Berkshire Sanctuary Network we hope to work together to support immigrant justice. We need to identify influential people and groups within the immigrant communities in Berkshire County. We need to let them lead and determine how to support them.

Sincerely,

Members of the BIO Sanctuary Team

Ann Clark

Elliott Hunnewell

Barbara Mahony

Barbara Johnson

Susan Wojtasik

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