

SANCTUARY FAQs: FIRST CHURCH IN CAMBRIDGE

What is Sanctuary?

Sanctuary is an ancient practice of faith communities, rooted in our scriptural traditions. (See: Lev. 19:33-34, Heb. 13:1-2, Eph. 2:19-22, Matt. 25:34-35). Sanctuary churches and synagogues have declared themselves to be places of refuge for persons unjustly accused of crimes. In our current context, sanctuary can be understood as moral, spiritual, psychological, financial, legal—and sometimes physical—support for people who are about to be detained or deported.

Why now? What has changed?

The political and social climate of our country has become increasingly hostile to immigrants. Under the new administration, prospects for undocumented immigrants are uncertain at best. In anticipation of a more aggressive Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policy on deportation, many churches in Cambridge and around the nation are in conversation to discern whether or not to offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants.

Why First Church? *What can we do that others cannot?*

As an Open and Affirming, Just Peace congregation, with a commitment to Beloved Community, First Church has a long history of inviting diverse people into community and providing welcome, shelter and hospitality. Our LGBTQ welcome, First Church Shelter, and Friday Café—in particular—are clear expressions of this commitment. Our Harvard Square location puts us in close proximity to many potential partners. The City of Cambridge has been a Sanctuary City since 1985. In November 2016, Cambridge officials re-articulated that commitment.

Who are our partners in this work?

First Church has begun conversation with other Harvard Square churches: University Lutheran (UniLu), Old Cambridge Baptist Church (OCBC), and First Parish, are engaged in this same process.

Are there different levels of involvement?

YES! The Massachusetts Community Action Network defines three levels of commitment to Sanctuary:

1. **Sanctuary Congregations:** Congregations willing to commit their space for families or individuals who seek refuge for an indefinite period of time, if the need arises.

2. **Sanctuary Supporter Congregations:** Congregations unable to provide the physical space for a family or individual but willing to commit as an institution to support the Sanctuary Congregation(s) in their region.
3. **Individual supporter:** Individuals who pledge their support (time, talent and/or treasure), if the need should arise.

What are the practical considerations?

First Church folks have asked questions about the impacts of Sanctuary on other users of the First Church building, as well as the practical needs for shelter, food, health care and other day to day needs of a refugee family. We are compiling a list of questions so we can study them carefully and make informed decisions about next steps.

Are there legal or financial risks to becoming a Sanctuary Church?

We can answer this in part, based on past experiences of Sanctuary Churches in an earlier period of aggressive deportations (the 1980s). But it is impossible to know at this time exactly what government policies might be today. Two things are clear right now:

- Supporting undocumented immigrants is a federal crime. Therefore, choosing to be a Sanctuary Church is an act of civil disobedience. The likely risks to individuals and institutions are hard to predict, because the government may decide not to prosecute in all cases. Nonetheless, declaring Sanctuary is a risk.
- No church should go it alone. That is why the Harvard Square churches have begun conversations aimed at building a Sanctuary Network of support.

What processes are taking place now at First Church?

- We have held three 10 am hour info sessions on the practical implications of becoming a Sanctuary Church (Jan. 8, 15, and 22.)
- Executive Council voted (Jan. 9) in favor of a motion to study the implications of Sanctuary for First Church. EC recommended the creation of a Sanctuary Task Force to study the issue.
- At Annual Meeting (Jan. 29) a motion will be put to a vote of the whole congregation. If the motion passes, a study group will be gathered to address the many questions that have been asked.

Please come to Annual Meeting after worship on Sunday, January 29, to ask your questions and voice your opinions on this important issue.