UCM Becoming a Sanctuary Congregation

**Background:**For centuries faith communities have felt called to offer sanctuary to those in danger of persecution. Ancient Hebrew temples and medieval churches offered refuge for those falsely accused of crimes. Late Roman Empire fugitives took shelter in Christian churches. Whether it be Jews fleeing the Nazis in Europe, or Americans of African descent fleeing the enforcers and practitioners of the institution of slavery, individuals in danger have been rescued by churches offering a safe place to rest and assistance in securing safety and freedom. The current Sanctuary Movement in the US was born in the 1970's in response to the need to offer protection to those fleeing civil wars and repression in Central America, conflicts fomented by right wing military dictatorships and death squads, which were being funded and trained by the US government. Since Central Americans were not recognized as being eligible for political asylum, they were, when deported from the US, sent back to their countries to face torture and execution. The Sanctuary Movement and other rights groups succeeded in the late 1980’s in getting the US government to extend the possibility of asylum to individuals from Central America. In 2007, as the number of deportations of individuals who has come to the US from Latin America skyrocketed, the New Sanctuary Movement became reactivated.   
  
Since Vermont's dairy industry is dependent on immigrant workers who do not have the option of legal residency (farm workers can only apply for seasonal work visas), approximately 1500 undocumented workers in Vermont are at risk of deportation. Many have been targeted during the current administration; that risk only promises to increase.   
  
**Action:  
What it means to offer sanctuary:**

If we become a sanctuary congregation, we will stand ready to house in our church building individuals in imminent danger of being apprehended by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). We would care for them (and perhaps their families), act as their advocate in partnership with Migrant Justice, Unitarian Universalist Refugee and Immigrant Service and Education (UURISE, a UU organization that provides legal assistance), immigration lawyers and other civil rights groups. Advocacy would entail publicizing the case (the format for press releases, letters to newspapers, vigils, etc is provided by the UUA so that the message remains uniform). The individuals in need of sanctuary would be referred to us by our local human rights advocacy group partners.   
  
We would need to designate a specific space or spaces in the church building that would be used, during the time that an individual is housed, solely for the purpose of that person's residence. (The space could maintain its normal function until such time as the need arose for conversion to a sanctuary living space; we could have furniture and supplies at the ready for quick conversion.) If the individual is supporting a family, the congregation might need to raise money to replace the lost salary.   
  
Though the legality of offering sanctuary is somewhat murky, clergy who have in the past been indicted for harboring individuals have all been acquitted.

Of course advocacy on behalf of undocumented immigrants in the United States does not need to stem solely from providing sanctuary to individuals facing deportation. The UUA website and the Sanctuary Movement and its affiliates have numerous suggestions and avenues for action.   
  
**Suggested way to proceed:**   
1. The Social Responsibility Committee would put out a call through the e-news for interested members of the congregation to form a group that would take responsibility for organizing an information session on becoming a sanctuary congregation, to be held after church. Members of Migrant Justice could perhaps be invited to speak.   
  
2. Joan could address from the pulpit what it truly means to be a welcoming community.    
  
3. The congregation votes on a resolution to declare UCM a sanctuary congregation.  
  
4. If the resolution is adopted, UCM notifies the national UU organization and local rights groups of our status.   
  
5. SRC reps hold meetings with Migrant Justice representatives, and other appropriate local rights groups and maintain connection with those groups

(I have been in communication with the national UU sanctuary movement contacts who have stressed the importance of forming bonds with local rights groups. Joan has made contact with Migrant Justice. She and I had the opportunity at the Migrant Justice Fiesta to speak with a board member. The board member was thrilled to hear that we were considering becoming a sanctuary congregation. She said, 'knowing that there is a safe place to go would mean so much to the farm workers.')  
  
Migrant Justice is undertaking a project, at the behest of its farm workers, to track the activities and movements of ICE officers in VT. This project could result in farm workers having more advance warning of when they are being targeted for arrest and could potentially increase the need for places of sanctuary.