



# Sanctuary in Action

## A FAITH-BASED, COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO INCREASED IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

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**N**ew Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia is an interfaith, immigrant justice group that organizes with 24 area congregations to work toward ending injustices against immigrants and to build a more welcoming city and country.

The congregations represent Jews, Catholics, Protestants and includes a group of Muslim women. We came together because we could no longer listen to the teachings of our faiths to welcome the stranger and love our neighbor and then see, without acting, increased deportations and anti-immigrant laws. We believe these teachings are not just words on a page, but calls to action and guides to living our lives. We strive to do this through our grassroots organizing, education and accompaniment programs.

Some congregations join because their members are affected, others join because they want to be in solidarity, but the common reason is the call to live out our faith. NSM is not just people of faith engaging in politics. Our faith is a deep well to nourish us, ground us and guide us on how we implement our campaigns and run our organization.

Congregations also join because we are a family. Many of our immigrant members are far from their loved ones, and the NSM community becomes a place to build family here. There is a temptation to spend every minute of our time together working, but we need to slow down to build relationships, support one another, celebrate small victories, and as Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, once wrote, “to build the new society in the shell of the old.” This is a way to live out our values now.

Finally, congregations join because we can have an impact.

### LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Leadership development is one of the most important things we do, and it weaves through all our work. One of our core beliefs is that people who are immigrants know best what they need, and therefore they should be leading our work. Our immigrant members choose our campaigns and form the committees to set strategy.

Our long-term goal is not just to change policy, but to alter the balance of power. If we aren’t engaging more people and developing leaders, we are not meeting our goals. We support this belief with formal training on campaigns and organizing, individual mentoring and monthly dinners for community building.

A few years ago, we held a 40-day fast to pressure Philadelphia to become a sanctuary city and to push for immigration reform. Ten people fasted for 40 days, and 125 fasted for from one to five days. This was a very powerful moment for us, as individuals and as an organization. We learned that when we combine our faith traditions and organize, we unleash the power of our faith and invite God into this work as an actor.

### SANCTUARY IN THE STREETS

Philadelphia became a sanctuary city in 2014 and maintains a policy towards immigrants that has kept families together and allowed us to grow our economy. The population of Philadelphia had been declining for decades, but 2010 census data showed the city’s population grew for the



first time in 60 years — because of the immigrant community.

Though there is no legal definition of “sanctuary city,” typically it means there is some type of restriction on local law enforcement’s collaboration with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. Many cities, including Philadelphia, will not hold someone for ICE without a judicial warrant.

President Donald J. Trump’s administration has threatened sanctuary cities with a cut-off of certain federal grants, and he has signed executive orders to step up anti-immigration enforcement, expand the categories of who can be deported and increase by 10,000 the number of ICE agents.

Since the end of January 2017, NSM has noted an uptick in calls reporting ICE agents conducting house raids and arresting family members. One call we received on our Raid Hotline came on Val-

entine’s Day, 2017, when an NSM community organizer took a call from a man speaking Spanish. The caller was panicked, saying ICE was at his door, and our staffer said she could hear pounding and voices yelling, “Open the door!”

As she gave the increasingly panicked caller a rundown of his rights, she suddenly heard screaming, and the line went dead.

We tried to call back multiple times, but there was no answer, and there had not been time to get the caller’s address. Those of us in the office huddled, trying to figure out what to do.

That’s when another of our organizers, a Latina grandmother and church leader—who has had her own house raided three times in the past 10 years — snapped us into action: Get to the local ICE building, she advised, see if we can confirm the raid.

We grabbed a bullhorn, a banner and some signs and jumped into a car. We got to the building and parked on the corner. Within five minutes, a white

ICE van pulled up with a young man in the back — presumably our caller.

At that point we activated our Sanctuary in the Streets raid response system, texting members of our partner congregations trained in the NSM response. When ICE raids someone’s house, the individuals cannot seek sanctuary in a congregation, so we bring the congregation to them.

NSM currently has 1,800 people in Philadelphia ready to respond to news of an immigration raid by showing up at the location and hosting an interfaith service. The goal is to support the family, shed light on ICE activity that is tearing families apart and send a clear message that ICE agents cannot take away our neighbors, friends and families without people of faith showing up to prayerfully and peacefully disrupt it.

On Valentine’s Day, we sent the emergency text, got out of our car, began filming and yelled



out to the man, “*Estamos con usted*” -- that is, “We are with you.” The ICE agents led him into the building, and we went to the street corner to regroup and wait. At that time, we had 250 people trained on the system, and within 20 minutes, 70 had arrived. We held a prayer vigil for a few hours, singing, praying, bearing witness.

That night, local media covered the action on their nightly news. I know the Spanish language media ran the story, too, because the “raid phone” lit up with calls from people checking to see if the raid hotline was real. People told us that ICE’s increased enforcement had sent a wave of terror through the community, but Sanctuary in the Streets was a message of hope.

#### ACCOMPANIMENT PROGRAM

One of the ways we respond to deportations is through the accompaniment program, which pairs NSM congregations with families facing deportation. Our goal is to build relationships and to surround vulnerable families with a community whose members will go with them to immigration court or detention centers. Placing the immigrant family within community not only shows judges and other officials that people are watching, it is a visual representation of God’s presence in places that have so much power over someone’s life.

Pedro, a man from Mexico, his wife and two young children were a family in our accompaniment program. Pedro was fighting deportation, and we partnered him with a member synagogue. We also connected him with HIAS Pennsylvania, an organization that provides legal representation.

On one court date, a small group of our members — Pedro’s community — went with him to the federal building. We held a small prayer circle outside. Pedro was quiet and anxious, and we could feel the tension rise as we entered the federal building and went through the metal detector.

There was a big waiting room where we signed in. Many other families and individuals were there, waiting for a court appearance. Some had lawyers, but many did not. In immigration court, if you cannot afford a lawyer, the state is not obligated to provide one, so many people go through their proceedings without representation.

Waiting is a big part of accompaniment — outside of a court, in detention centers for visiting hours, outside of probation check-ins. We wait, we talk, we are quiet, we pray.

I pray nonstop in these courts. The hearing rooms are small, but the weight of their influence is palpable — this system, this judge, has so much power over lives. Accompaniment is not a protest, but more of a witness and solidarity.

We filed into the hearing room quietly, each person wearing an NSM button, and we watched the cases that came ahead of Pedro’s. A family before us didn’t have a lawyer. The judge and prosecutor went back and forth in legal language, referencing case numbers, legal code numbers. It’s a language I struggled to follow.

As I listened and looked at the scene in front of me — a judge, prosecutor and defendant — I realized this is the bureaucracy of who is “in” and who is “out.” Laws and numbers matter, but seemingly not the person. The teaching that we are all children of God felt so far from this space, and I prayed harder.

Next it was time for Pedro. He stood up and went to sit at a table. Nothing of consequence

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happened that day, this was one in a series of hearings as Pedro’s case moved slowly through the court. Still, the atmosphere was tense. He was given another court date, and we left the courtroom. After a short debriefing, a prayer and some hugs, Pedro’s community dispersed until next time.

We hope accompaniment can be a transformational experience — for NSM members and allies to see the reality of how the immigration system works, and for immigrants to see the power of numbers. And, in moving closer to one another, we hope to effect the transformation of a system

that decides who is “in” and who is “out.”

### **FAITH, AND FAITH TRADITIONS**

As people of faith, we believe we have a responsibility to act in the face of injustice. We also have a deep well of faith traditions to draw on and guide us.

One Bible passage that I have found particularly poignant is from the Gospel of Matthew, when Peter walks on water. Jesus sends the disciples ahead to cross the lake by boat while he remains behind alone to pray. But during the night, a high wind and large waves threaten the disciples’ boat. Stormy weather in the darkness is terrifying — a moment that makes us feel powerless. But then the disciples see Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. They think it is a ghost and cry out in fear.

Jesus tells them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” says Jesus, and Peter steps out of the boat and begins walking on the water. But he soon gets distracted, frightened by the fierce wind, and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out for him, lifts him up — and chastises him for his lack of faith.

I usually read this passage in judgment, shaking my head at another failure of Peter’s. But during a retreat this past January, I began seeing the story from a different perspective.

It struck me that before he sank, Peter did actually walk on water. It was Peter who got out of the boat while everyone else stayed in. That’s major. I began to wonder about the impact the whole experience had on him and on the other disciples. Perhaps it played a role in the disciples’ development, in growing that fearless community we later find in the Acts of the Apostles.

Two days after the 2016 elections, NSM held an emergency meeting with our immigrant members in a church cafeteria. As we tried to process the victory of a presidential candidate who ran a blatantly anti-immigrant campaign, many people spoke about their fear, but many shared more than that.

One woman stood up and said, “We have crossed rivers, we have crossed borders. We are strong people, and we can fight this.”

Another gave a broader perspective: “It’s not like things were great before the election — [President Barack] Obama deported 2.5 million people. We have lived with this racism and xenophobia for years. Now it’s just out in the open.”

And another woman called the group to action: “Now is the time to fight.”

Our immigrant members bring resiliency, deep faith, and strength to the fight for policies that enact our values to welcome the stranger and love our neighbor. For our faith values to translate into meaningful change, we must act as a community. As a community, we can help each other make that step, like Peter. We can help each other stay focused on God, on our faith, on striving for justice — on these things, not those that seem so overwhelming.

Today, we certainly are facing fierce winds and high waves, but the Gospel provides us with some guidance on how to act. First, like Peter, we must step out of the boat. This is hard and means taking a risk, but like Peter, we must stay focused on Jesus and respond to Jesus’ words: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Second, we need to believe we can walk on water. We need to live out the promise Jesus makes throughout the Gospel of the transformational power of our faith.

Third, we need to believe that God is not only present, but an actor, actively reaching out for us. We need to let this affect how we act as individuals and as organizations.

At New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, we humbly strive to step out of the boat, to live into the power of our faith and walk on water. In this moment, we need thousands stepping out, not just one, and we all need to walk on the water, despite the darkness and the fear.

Ultimately this is not about surviving a storm. It is the long-term work of transforming ourselves, our city and the balance of power. It is about building sanctuary from the ground up, which brings us closer to one another and to God.

We are living in challenging times. And so we all need to dig deep in our faith and step out of the boat.

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