

Minister sees no choice but to fight for refugees

by [Bob Braun](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service HIGHLAND PARK, N.J. (RNS) He is young and looks even younger than his 36 years. Yet in the midst of a confrontation with the federal government that could have grave consequences for his future, the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale acts with the poise of a much older man.

"I'm not afraid," says the co-pastor of the Reformed Church of Highland Park. "To me, we're facing a cross, and crosses are what we face. We know about facing crosses and we know about the hope that's found on the other side of crosses, so we walk with confidence toward crosses."

In the last few days, he has admitted two more men into his church to find sanctuary from federal immigration officials who want them deported. That makes three. Kaper-Dale is likely to bring in more, although he could face charges of conspiracy to violate the nation's immigration laws.

"Our arms are open wide, as wide as the cross," says the young man who, until this struggle over the immigration status of Indonesian refugees, was known primarily as a housing activist who has helped the homeless, the poor, veterans and single mothers. He calls the immigration system "broken."

Kaper-Dale, whose wife, Stephanie, is co-pastor of the church, did not intend to become the defiant hero for Indonesian Christian immigrants who fled persecution in the midst of chaos that followed the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998.

When he and his wife were hired by church elders in 2001, he learned many of his parishioners were Indonesian. Virtually all had overstayed tourist visas given out by American officials apparently concerned about the attacks on Christians in the world's most populous Islamic country.

The minister encouraged the immigrants to try to normalize their status -- but then deportations began and Kaper-Dale felt a sense of personal, as well as pastoral, responsibility.

"It just proves the point that those who follow the rules, who register, who let people know they're here -- they're more likely to be deported than those who hide," says Kaper-Dale.

Immigration officials have labeled the people seeking sanctuary in Kaper-Dale's church "egregious immigration offenders" and insist they be deported, but they haven't breached the tradition of not raiding places of worship.

Earlier this week, however, one parishioner was arrested and deported.

Kaper-Dale had denied him sanctuary; he had just left Sunday services at the church.

"I am shook up about that," says Kaper-Dale. But he notes the man's family was in Indonesia and seemed safe.

The minister felt he should save his activism for those he believes really do face danger if sent back. "We've got too much at stake here," he says, noting the idea of keeping the man here away from his wife and family would create the "wrong narrative."

His use of the word "narrative" is deliberate. Kaper-Dale is trying to tell a story, and he's doing it dramatically, getting news coverage from around the world by using the medieval protections of church sanctuary. He's playing for time, hoping Congress will pass a bill to give asylum to Christian victims of persecution in Indonesia.

Kaper-Dale says he tried to bargain with federal officials, asking for a six-month reprieve from deportations so he could lobby for the bill. He said he would not grant sanctuary to anyone else. He was turned down.

The actions of the young cleric would be recognizable to a different generation, those who remember when evangelical Christianity was a force on the political left, not the right. Kaper-Dale calls Jimmy Carter "my hero" and the "best president" the nation had.

"He stood for things, and those things led to his political crucifixion," says Kaper-Dale. Carter, who dropped his affiliation with the Southern Baptist Church because of its treatment of women, was "resurrected" after his presidency, Kaper-Dale said.

The minister grew up in Vermont, the son of a teacher and a state official in charge of children's services. He attended evangelical churches but called himself a "church mutt" whose family didn't settle with any one denomination.

He attended Hope College in Holland, Mich., where he met the woman who would become his wife and co-pastor. He also met a leader of a Reformed Church who became an advocate for Hispanic farm workers.

He and his wife -- before their marriage, he was Seth Dale and she was Stephanie Kaper -- spent a year working with homeless children in Ecuador. They also worked in India. They were admitted to Princeton Theological Seminary and were hired by the Highland Park church in 2001, just after their graduation. They have three daughters.

His is a Christianity of the moment. He says he is less concerned about what happens to him after he dies than he is in "bringing change now." His church has grown "tenfold," he says and attributes that to his mix of theology and action. "Serving radically has been a springboard to growth."

That's been true since the church began, he said.

"The Romans thought they would end it by crucifying one man -- but that was just the start."