

Dilemma on sheltering immigrants: What is legal and what is right

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The double-edged question vexes many local congregations in the middle of the immigration debate: What is legal—and what is right?

That dilemma has permeated church discussions in Portland, Oregon, after 167 suspected illegal workers were detained in a June 12 raid at the Fresh Del Monte Produce plant. In community-room meetings and in pulpits, church leaders ask whether they should provide sanctuary for undocumented immigrants.

Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland has officially signed on with the New Sanctuary Movement, a national effort to shelter people facing deportation. Other churches—not only in Oregon’s biggest city but also in other states—are contemplating that move.

Some Portland churches have decided not to offer help, citing their members’ discomfort with legal or liability issues or a lack of space and resources. But the recent raid appears to have been a tipping point, said David Leslie, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. “This raid has made the abstract real,” Leslie said.

Against a backdrop of stepped-up immigration enforcement nationally, church leaders have had regular discussions about joining the New Sanctuary Movement, a national interfaith coalition modeled after a 1980s initiative by churches that sheltered Central Americans who were fleeing death squads.

Congregations are asked to sign a pledge to give shelter to those facing deportation, particularly those who could be separated from their children who are U.S. citizens. The new movement was launched May 9 with public events in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego and Seattle.

On June 8, St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Long Beach, California, started providing living space for 28-year-old Liliana Sanctuario (whose actual last name was withheld

for her protection) and her two-month-old son, Pablo. “This is not hiding, this is public hospitality,” Julie Wakelee-Lynch, associate pastor, told Episcopal News Service.

“Her three children and her husband are U.S. citizens, [and] all are legal residents, which is why deportation won’t work for Liliana,” said Wakelee-Lynch, who added that the step was also taken to demonstrate the need for effective immigration reform. Liliana began living at the church one day after a compromise bill on immigration reform was scuttled, at least temporarily, in the U.S. Senate.

The New Sanctuary Movement emerged partly in response to the case of a Chicago woman, Elvira Arellano, who took refuge in August 2006 at a Methodist church while facing deportation and separation from her seven-year-old son born in the U.S.

Participating churches believe that providing humanitarian assistance does not violate the law as long as it is done openly and they do not hide illegal immigrants. Immigration police historically have not entered places of worship.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has not taken action in Arellano’s case or against the movement. A spokesperson provided a statement saying that while the agency has authority to enforce the law at any place and any time, “we do it at appropriate times and at appropriate places.”

After the Portland raid, a few dozen detained at the plant who have children were temporarily released for humanitarian reasons, and advocates were negotiating on behalf of other such parents.

Andrea Cano, executive director of Oregon Farmworker Ministries, said accounts of families being divided—and the prospect of U.S.-born children having their parents deported to Latin America—moved many congregations sitting on the fence.

“Now, they have no choice. They have to decide,” Cano said. “For many, this was the time to be a good Samaritan.”

Not all churches reached the same conclusion.

Mark Hoelter, pastor of the Trinity Lutheran School and Church in Portland, said some members of his congregation would not be comfortable working with illegal immigrants, even if they don’t express that uneasiness publicly.

“I’m sure that people, before we can talk or decide something like that, will want to know what are the legal costs,” Hoelter said. “What would it mean? Would there be possible sanctions against the church? I’d want to know that myself.”

Lynne Smouse López, pastor of Ainsworth United Church of Christ in Portland, said her church is on the verge of becoming an official New Sanctuary site. In the meantime, it is offering housing and help to those affected by the Del Monte raids. “Certainly our [congregation] isn’t unanimous in this,” Smouse López said. -*Religion News Service*