

The Road to New Sanctuary: How the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury Joined the Movement

*by Charles Stark
Updated 10/1/08*

On May 16, 2008, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Danbury (UUCD) voted, with 90% support of voting members, to become the first congregation of any denomination in Connecticut to join the New Sanctuary Movement. The story of how this came about is one that may be instructive to other churches as they struggle with the difficult and divisive issue of immigration in America.

Tensions Mount Between Immigrants and Police & Within the Community

Our congregation's home city of Danbury is a polyglot admixture of ethnic groups. According to the 2000 census (most recent data available), Danbury's population of approximately 75,000 is about 76 percent white, 16 percent Hispanic or Latino of any race, 7 percent African American, and 5.5 percent Asian. Anecdotal estimates place the undocumented population somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000: about 12 to 25 percent of the total population.

Danbury has become a lightning rod for both immigration restrictionists and pro-immigrant activists. The Social Action Committee of our congregations has been among the most prominent of the latter.

Danbury's Latino community is made up of Brazilians, Ecuadorians, and other Central and South Americans. The Brazilians were among the first people to immigrate here, probably because of the strong Portuguese presence in town. These groups coexisted with each other and with the Anglo community, without much interaction between them.

In the spring of 2005, a state-wide anti-immigrant group came to the American Legion hall in Danbury to hold a meeting. They advertised themselves as citizens concerned with the "immigrant problem" in Danbury. Members of the UUCD Social Action Committee, along with other pro-immigrant groups, were there to picket outside. I chose to hold a sign that said, "No Human Being is Illegal." It was my first foray into this debate.

Fearing a poisonous atmosphere created by forces coming from outside the city, our local interfaith organization, the Association of Religious Communities (ARC), sponsored a Unity March down Main Street in June 2005. This peaceful march, featuring a rally in a park attended by leaders from the Anglo and Latino communities, drew a large crowd and was praised by all for its peaceful and affirming message.

But the local anti-immigrant forces, which had broken away from the state-wide group to form their own local group, were not to be silenced. They became well organized and began to exert considerable influence in City Hall, with both the mayor and common council.

Anti-Immigrant Ordinances Take Effect

An ordinance was passed outlawing volleyball games, which were a popular warm weather nighttime activity in the Ecuadorian community. Since the games drew crowds into residential neighborhoods, and were often accompanied by drinking and gambling, they were a source of irritation to some neighbors.

When Brazil won the soccer World Cup, a gleeful impromptu parade occurred on Main Street. Brazilians drove down the street, waving the Brazilian flag and honking their horns, enlivening a quiet Saturday afternoon. The police and some bystanders were not pleased.

A major source of irritation to the Anglo community, including to some who were not otherwise disposed toward anti-immigrant prejudice, has been the presence of large numbers of day laborers who congregate in a downtown park, seeking to meet up with contractors and potential employers. On September 19, 2006, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, disguising themselves as contractors, drove to the park in a van and picked up eleven day laborers on the pretext of needing workers to tear down a fence. The Danbury 11, as they later came to be known, were taken into custody.

While first denying any local involvement, the mayor later admitted that a Danbury police officer drove the van. The case was given widespread publicity and resulted in a civil rights lawsuit brought in federal court by a clinic of Yale Law School. The city of Danbury and Mayor Mark Boughton are among the defendants. The case is still pending and is in the discovery phase.

Other ICE actions have followed, with numerous undocumented immigrants arrested, many of whom were charged with no criminal violations. Mayor Boughton became a founder of a fledgling organization of mayors and county executives dealing with the "immigrant problem."

In January 2008, the Danbury Common Council began to explore entering into a partnership with ICE. A large protest rally ensued. As reported in the press:

An estimated 3,500 people attended a rally on Feb. 6 in Danbury, Connecticut, to protest a partnership between Danbury police and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). While the demonstrators voiced their opposition outside City Hall, inside, the Common council voted 19-2 to invite ICE to train and deputize Danbury police as immigration agents. Mayor Mark Boughton, who backs the plan, said it will start with the training of two detectives to carry out investigations of immigrants suspected of

human trafficking, drug smuggling, or document fraud. [News-Times (Danbury) 2/7/08; Hartford Courant 2/7/08].

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Danbury Learns About the New Sanctuary Movement

This was the first time in my memory that members of the Brazilian, Hispanic, and Anglo communities had all come together for one cause. It was against this backdrop that the Social Action Committee of the UUCD thought about what it and the congregation could do.

In the 1960s, the congregation had moved from the city of Danbury into a woodsy suburb and a worship space everyone called "the Barn." With the turn of the new millenium, the congregation decided to move back into the city, in order to become a more relevant force for religious liberalism. It seemed that the immigration conflict, which was rolling into the city, was the intersection of events and intention.

In the summer of 2007, I became aware of the New Sanctuary Movement, which was dedicated to keeping immigrant families together and fighting unjust deportations, and had been endorsed by UUA President Rev. Bill Sinkford and the UUA. I called Father Juan Carlos Ruiz, one of the founders of the New Sanctuary Movement (NSM). Currently, Father Ruiz is the coordinator of the New York City NSM Coalition. *For more information about the New Sanctuary Movement, go to their website at newsanctuarymovement.org, or search for "New Sanctuary Movement" on UUA.org.*

I took the information I learned from Father Ruiz back to the Social Action Committee as we started a new church year in September. Our committee decided to ask the congregation to take the New Sanctuary Movement Pledge and join. In my rather naive enthusiasm, I urged that we submit this to a congregational meeting at the earliest possible opportunity. Wiser heads, from people like Chris Halfar, the committee chair, Lynn Taborsak, a former state representative and Common Council member, and Jean Hislop, an immigrant rights activist, and others, were persuasive in recommending that a program of education and inspiration would be necessary before we could have that vote.

A Program of Education and Inspiration

Now, to me the first UU principle was pretty clear. I couldn't find an exception for the undocumented in "the inherent worth and dignity of all people." But to many of our members, all of whom I know share a commitment to the UU principles, this issue was problematic. "But they are illegal," "They broke the law," and "My people came here legally, why couldn't they?" were not uncommon sentiments, expressed or not. Our work was cut out for us.

We started our campaign with a lay-led service. Each of the participants wore a sign on her or his neck identifying their own ethnic group in the most unflattering terms. I

wore "Kike." Others wore "Wop" and "Sheeney." You get the picture. We never referred to the signs during the service, but the statement was powerful.

We sang in Spanish and told stories. I spoke about the history of immigration law in the United States, going back to the Asian exclusion acts, to demonstrate the racist history of North American immigration regulation. During our Milestones segment, a local Hispanic resident got up and tearfully said that it was the first time he felt welcome in an Anglo church.

In a later service, our minister, the Rev. Dr. Linda Hansen, preached on welcoming the stranger and spoke of the New Sanctuary Movement. Jean Hislop organized an interfaith rally in the very park where the Danbury 11 had been arrested. Our board president Carl Tichler and our minister spoke, along with other clergy and local immigrant leaders. It was reported by the local press.

Rachel Soltis, a representative of the New Sanctuary Movement, came to our church and spoke with interested congregants following a Sunday service.

We followed with forums exploring various aspects of the immigration problem. We served ethnic foods. We held a forum on the "Politics of Immigration." The panelists were two former Danbury mayors and two college professors. We had another forum called, "Voices of Immigrants." Several members of the community, now citizens and business owners, told of their decision to leave their home countries and come here illegally. They spoke of the hurt of leaving their families behind, of living in the shadows and struggling to make a better life here than was possible where they came from.

These events were open to the public and covered by the press. I took heart in seeing faces of many colors and hues seated in our fellowship hall.

Yet some of our congregants were uneasy. Our immigrant guests, who just wanted to express to us norteamericanos how they felt, dominated many of the discussions and question & answer sessions. Some of our regulars undoubtedly felt intimidated about expressing views that might be looked at as racist or unfriendly. Some may have felt like strangers in their own sanctuary.

Children of Immigrants Witness and the Congregation Votes

In the week before the vote, we had a service on the "Children of Immigrants." Two honor students at Danbury High School, both U.S.-born children of undocumented parents, participated. One told of the horror of ICE agents coming to his home in search of his mother, a law-abiding Brazilian woman who had been cleaning houses here for twenty years. He told of how he, his father, and younger brother were forced to remain in the house for hours and how he was ordered to call his mother and tell her to come home from work, without telling her why. And he told of seeing her arrested and taken to detention. The other student spoke about the fear she feels every time someone knocks on the door, knowing that her Nicaraguan mother could be taken any day.

We followed the service with a meeting for our congregants only with Juan Carlos Ruiz. Father Ruiz spoke and answered questions from an audience of about sixty people for three and a half hours. We finally had to stop, lest he lose his voice. Father Ruiz calmly and rationally, yet with quiet force and emotion, told us what we might be getting into. People voiced concern about the legalities of what we were contemplating. They were concerned about financial jeopardy. He answered every question. He did not downplay the gravity of the situation. He inspired us.

Finally, on May 6th, our annual meeting arrived. A resolution calling upon us as a congregation to stand up and be counted as part of the New Sanctuary Movement was before the membership for a vote. Discussion on the motion was held. Many people, including several who had not participated before, spoke up. Some spoke in opposition. More took the position epitomized by one of our veteran members who said that while he understood the opposition, he would not vote to slam our doors in the faces of people, our neighbors, who were being oppressed.

The vote was tabulated, and the motion carried with a 90% majority.

The Beginning

We feel that this is the beginning, and not the end of the story. Where we go from here, what steps we take, what we can do to help the downtrodden, calm the waters, and dispel the fear, are questions we are now contemplating. Action must follow.

Some of the steps we contemplate for the near future include recruiting other local congregations to form a cluster in our area, finding a local family in need that fits the criteria of the NSM, writing open letters to the press about cooperation with ICE, calling on the local probation office to stop delivering probationers for deportation regardless of the nature of their offense, lobbying our Congressional representatives, participating in a raids rapid response network, holding services and other events in our church to highlight the challenges of living in this culture, holding intercultural events with local churches that have immigrant congregations, sponsoring “Know Your Rights” presentations and producing a positive community access cable TV show.

We are very interested in hearing from other Unitarian Universalist congregations who are engaged in this fight to share our experiences. This is an issue and a battle that will not be going away any time soon.

We go forth in togetherness and solidarity with our immigrant brothers and sisters.

So may it be.