

Temple Emanu-El: A Solidarity Congregation

An Evolving Plan for Temple

This effort is an outgrowth of the Board's recent vote on immigration rights, the Board's approval of expanding our community garden to include refugee families, and Temple's history. In partnership with Faith in Texas, a multi-racial, multi-faith broad-based movement, Temple Emanu-El is committed to acting together on local, state-wide and national issues. Through our shared work, we are seeking ways to powerfully and effectively stand together with our refugee and immigrant neighbors when they are subjected to discrimination, hate crimes, and bigotry. Faith in Texas calls upon congregations to provide any of the following support as "solidarity congregations":

PROVISION

- Food, Water, Transportation
- Legal support (Know your rights; provide resources and guidance for a family preparedness plan which includes the POA and Caregiver designation form)
- Mental health support

RAPID ACTION

- Accompany people that have to check in with ICE and ensure due process is followed
- Host or send people to Rapid Action Network Trainings led by Faith in Texas

SHARING STORIES PUBLICLY

- Attend and encourage participation by our members at press conferences and vigils in solidarity with people who are wrongfully targeted
- Teach and speak publically about own stories both personal and from our faith traditions
- Convene across faith and race lines to share our stories

POLICY

- Advocate for policies that support unfairly treated or vulnerable families

Through each step, we will work closely with our Temple legal consultants to avoid liability for any actions taken as a Solidarity Congregation. We will not interfere with ICE (or other enforcing agency) deportation efforts.

Already, members of our congregation and clergy have participated in rapid response trainings, have organized 'Know Your Right's trainings,' and participated in public rallies and vigils. If this plan is approved, we will publically affirm our participation in Faith in Texas' group of solidarity congregations. We will expand our existing efforts through the support of Temple lay leaders, staff and clergy, and work in concert with our Communications team to communicate what it means to be a solidarity congregation and how to become involved. Each element of our work will require team captains who can help mobilize volunteers to be most effective and useful. Through Faith in Texas, there will be training and resources provided to each team so that all involved can be aware and sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable families within whom we stand in solidarity.

How are we different than a Sanctuary Congregation?

The Sanctuary Movement began in the 1980s, when churches and synagogues took in Central American refugees who weren't able to receive asylum status due to US government restrictions. In 1985, the Reform Movement adopted a resolution encouraging Reform congregations to provide some form of sanctuary, whether physical shelter, mobilizing resources, or participating in public advocacy.¹

As distinguished from sanctuary congregations that provide shelter, becoming a solidarity congregation will enable us to respond to the range of issues on which we are called to act today. In addition to responding as outlined above, we want to act nimbly and effectively when other faith groups are targeted unjustly. Additionally, "sanctuary" has become a politicized term, and we don't want that to hinder our efforts to engage a broad range of political viewpoints.

Committing as a Temple Community – Why?

The repetition of words and phrases in the Torah is a way to emphasize the importance of a message. So, with that in mind, the law repeated with the most frequency in the Biblical text is the one commanding the Israelites not to oppress the stranger. We were strangers in Egypt. We know what it feels like, and we are commanded to act on that feeling—reaching out a hand with an open heart and a generous spirit. In Leviticus we read, the following:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God (Leviticus 19:33).

As Jews, we hold as a core value that every human being deserves equal dignity. The text above teaches us that God's presence is brought into the spaces that we inhabit—where we live, work, pray and study—when we recognize the spark of God in others, including the "strangers" among us. When you think about it, many immigrants are really not strangers at all, rather they are neighbors, friends, volunteers, parents, and people we encounter each and every day.

For example, Gabriela, a resident of Arlington, will soon face deportation. Gabriela will be deported because of a felony conviction for a fake ID she used to work to provide for her family. Her children are ages 7, 11 and 17. They feel scared, vulnerable and torn apart. Her children can't concentrate in school and the 17 year old is planning to defer going to college so she can now help provide for the family. While Gabriela's deportation is a foregone conclusion, as a solidarity congregation we can help families prepare for such an event. We can offer support to Gabriela's children. We can raise our voices.

Since the first executive order was issued in late January 2017, we are keeping a congregational letter written by Rabbi Stern and Past-President Mark Zilbermann as our moral compass. In our February Board meeting, the Temple Emanu-El Board affirmed this letter which "proclaim[ed] Temple Emanu-El's stance in favor of immigration rights in this great nation of the United States of America, and in strongest opposition to the Executive Order signed by the President on January 27, 2017...Our people know too well what it means to have the door of freedom, sanctuary and opportunity slammed in our faces when we are at our most desperate. Our people know too well what it means to be subjected to religious loyalty tests, or to have our prospects defined by the prejudices of others. We do not assume nobility or privilege as the result of our past suffering. We do assume responsibility."²

In assuming our responsibility, we do so as a community that has stood resolutely and acted compassionately in the face of injustice for almost 150 years. Now, more than ever, we need people across the political and religious spectrum to work side by side, with vigilance and cooperation. Our conscience will not let us turn our backs on Gabriela's family and others like them.

F.A.Q

IS THERE SOME KIND OF VETTING PROCESS TO HELP US FIGURE OUT WHICH FAMILIES TO HELP?

Yes. Through Faith in Texas (who is part of a national organization called PICO), we will determine which families to help. Many families will emerge through our network of Faith in Texas congregations. Once we have identified families to help through FIT, The Vice President of the Social Justice Council will sign off in consultation with the Just Congregations Chair.

ARE WE AIDING AND ABETTING?

We are comfortable that we are not, and if that standard ever changes, we would continue to seek ways to uphold our principles while minimizing risks to our congregation.

IS TEMPLE TAKING A PARTISAN STANCE?

No, this is nonpartisan. Our partner, Faith in TX, represents a very broad base of people. We view this as a humanitarian issue, as we work with families who need help.

I'M NOT CLEAR ON THE DIFFERENT GROUPS WORKING ON THIS—WHAT'S JUST CONGREGATIONS, FAITH IN TX AND PICO?

For over ten years, Temple has been engaged in faith-based community organizing. Community organizing is a systematic approach to addressing the root causes of social problems. It is a process by which people investigate and act together to change their communities and society. Through community organizing people meet others who share similar values and interests. Together they identify common goals and learn tools to build organizations and participate in public life.³ Just Congregations is the core team helping build community within our congregation, helping understand which social justice issues matter most to our members and always finding new ways to take action. From the start, we knew we couldn't do this work without strong partners, across lines of race, class, and faith. Faith in Texas is a movement of churches, synagogues and mosques, all working together to have a powerful impact locally. Nationally, Faith in Texas is connected to federations across the US, all part of an organization called PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing).

Appendix

Dear Friends,

We write to you as leaders of this diverse congregation. For almost 150 years, Temple Emanu-El has provided a voice of conscience and a welcoming home to those who seek meaning here, spanning age, race, political affiliation, sexuality, religious practice and more. In distinction to prevailing trends in today's society, we strive to be a place of civility, mutual respect and loving kindness. In contrast to a polemical atmosphere of division and anger, our congregation represents recognitions from the heart of Jewish spirituality: We need each other. We are responsible for each other. We are interconnected, woven into a single fabric of existence. Our Torah teaches, and we read aloud every Yom Kippur afternoon: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I the Lord am your God."

And that is why we share this message with you: to proclaim Temple Emanu-El's stance in favor of immigration rights in this great nation of the United States of America, and in strongest opposition to the Executive Order signed by the President on January 27, 2017. In expressing our opposition, we join with scores of Jewish organizations from across the Jewish and political spectrum: the

rabbinic and congregational organizations of the Reform movement, the Conservative movement and the Orthodox movement, as well as the National Council of Jewish Women, the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, HIAS (The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), the Jewish Public Affairs Council, American Jewish World Service, and more. We join with leaders on the left and the right. And of course we join with our Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters, and leaders of all faiths, who share these convictions. We join with the experience of our ancestors and the conscience of our history. Familiar with the terror of violence, we affirm the imperative of security, and support the rigorous vetting that is already in place for refugees and immigrants who would seek entry to America. But we oppose restrictions specifically targeted at Muslim-majority countries, and restrictions that deny freedom to innocents without increasing the safety of our citizens.

Our people know too well what it means to have the door of freedom, sanctuary and opportunity slammed in our faces when we are at our most desperate. Our people know too well what it means to be subjected to religious loyalty tests, or to have our prospects defined by the prejudices of others. We do not assume nobility or privilege as the result of our past suffering. We do assume responsibility.