

Western Friend

Quaker Plain Speech and Spirit in the West

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On Politics



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The Landscape of Sanctuary

by Marian Bock

Albuquerque Monthly Meeting is “positioned” in a cultural and political landscape, but I can no more see our position in that landscape than I can see the position of our planet in the Milky Way, or the back of my own head. I can see that our meetinghouse sits on a one-way street in a valley separating the Sandia Mountains on the east from the Mesa on the west. Ask me about the minutiae of operating a sanctuary in a Quaker meetinghouse, and I can hold forth. Ask me about our position in the political landscape, and I find myself in a vortex of questions: What is sanctuary? What is political? What is a landscape?

Sanctuary in 1980s was all about refugees from terror in Central America. The political challenge was to denounce U.S. support of the U.S.-backed regime in El Salvador and the U.S.-backed counterrevolution in Nicaragua; the personal challenge was to house and comfort refugees who arrived with the clothes on their backs and varying degrees of post-traumatic stress.

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In 2017, we say that the sanctuary movement is “different.” Our guests are already deeply rooted in American society. Only a few of them are fleeing torture and death in the countries of their birth. We talk instead about “economic migrants.” The organization New Sanctuary Movement estimates that at least 600,000 people in the United States have at least one family member who is in danger of deportation. Most Americans – excepting Native Americans and African Americans – are descendants of people who came here seeking economic opportunity. In this context, the terms “immigrant” and “economic migrant” actually

serve to obscure the racism and xenophobia that fuel the war against people of color. We might do better to speak of “undocumented Americans.”

The decision of Albuquerque Monthly Meeting to offer sanctuary to Emma, an undocumented American from Honduras, was both an extension of and a reason for an ongoing exploration of our whiteness. Anyone can see that our meeting is mostly white. It is uncomfortable to see that this places us at the privileged end of a steeply tilted playing field. Our goal is to maintain a continuing effort to become increasingly alert to our own biases and the systemic racism in our meeting. At the same time, we feel lead as a community to publicly denounce an administration that is rallying the forces of racism and xenophobia to promote an immigration policy that is tantamount to genocide.

According to the Church World Service, twenty-two faith communities in the U.S. have publicly taken immigrants into sanctuary since 2014. As of June 2017, sixteen of those immigrants have received relief from deportation and six remain in sanctuary, awaiting decisions from immigration officials. Today’s sanctuary communities are not defying the law, but rather are insisting that the law be enforced. They are taking the position that their guests are entitled to due process, and they are making the point that ICE is deporting people who would, given due process, be allowed to stay here in their homes. Like many acts of civil disobedience, this is an act of faith in the system – in the courts and the Constitution.

“Even a symbolic act has to be visible,” said one Friend during a discussion of our (lack of) media strategy. Our clerk argues that we are obligated to highlight the racial justice aspect of this witness, but after an initial flurry of hostile on-line comments, our declaration of sanctuary has attracted nothing but admiring attention. By declaring our meetinghouse to be a sanctuary for an undocumented American, we are waving the White Flag of Privilege in the face of a mostly indifferent society.

At the end of May, almost one hundred days after her arrival in sanctuary, we celebrated Emma’s birthday with a volunteer-appreciation party. In a large room full of

sanctuary supporters, you could count the people of color on one hand.

During the party, Emma received an ovation when she stepped onto our modest stage (a vestige of the Baptist church that formerly owned our meetinghouse). What, exactly, were we applauding? Emma is a delightful person, to be sure – but we didn't applaud her for being lovable. She has been a contributing member of U.S. society for decades – but we didn't applaud her for twenty-six years of menial work. Many people are impressed by the courage required to go into sanctuary, but Emma is a not a refugee from atrocities or political persecution.

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We need her more than she needs us. We wouldn't be a sanctuary without her. So perhaps we were applauding ourselves, our decision to offer sanctuary in defiance of government policy that is indiscriminate and unhealthy and tears families apart. Or perhaps we really were thanking Emma – for being the tree that we are hugging.

None of us has the slightest fear of going to jail over sanctuary. There are no Schindlers among us. We are not an underground railroad; nobody is making any midnight runs for the Canadian border. Perhaps the government has figured out that ignoring us is the best way to deny us a place on the political landscape. Perhaps we have "positioned" ourselves into a luxurious corner of an ineffective movement.

Privilege, like other ill-gotten gains, can be put to good use. Money can buy education and health care for the underserved. Celebrity can draw public attention to neglected issues. What better use could there be for white privilege than to draw a circle of protection around our neighbor? On the other hand, Emma is an intensely private person with an aversion to microphones and cameras. We see it as our duty to keep her profile as low as possible, while ensuring that she receives due process.

On the other hand, if we take Emma in, but fail to position ourselves in the conversation about immigration – specifically, the racist foundation of the war against undocumented Americans – we are doing less than half the job of sanctuary. On the other hand ... we will run out of "hands," grappling with the moral ambiguity of our position.

Writer Teju Cole coined the phrase "White Savior Industrial Complex" in 2012. His manifesto reads in part: "This world exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs – of white people. . . . The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege." In the case of our act of sanctuary, there is no denying the aptness of these words.

In May, I asked two seasoned activists, one Latinx and one Native American: "Can we provide sanctuary without becoming 'white saviors'?" Each of them gave me essentially the same response: "Sit with the question." They did not say, "Sit idly with the question."

In 1986, Jim Corbett wrote in *The Sanctuary Church*: "We can see this choice to provide Sanctuary as also about more than sharing our privileges with the poor and persecuted; it is about turning toward a radically different ground of empowerment." Corbett saw the potential of the movement to "do justice" rather than merely denounce injustice. He went on: "The church has an enormous potential for checking and balancing the state's use and abuse of coercive force."

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Sure, we can see it that way, but that doesn't alter the fact that our meeting has found it takes a very large, mostly white village to shield one Spanish-speaking immigrant from extrajudicial deportation by a government that pretends to be targeting criminals while spending our

tax money to persecute a retired hotel chambermaid. Nationwide, sanctuary congregations are embracing just twenty-two of the eleven million people who are under direct attack from the malicious absurdity of current U.S. immigration policy. We are comforting the afflicted – a tiny handful of them – but I don't see that we are afflicting the comfortable. It would be grandiose to claim a place in the political landscape based on the words of our admirers.

And yet, there is nothing symbolic about sanctuary for those twenty-two people. There is nothing symbolic about it for Emma, her husband, her children and grandchildren.

Friends assure me that sanctuary is putting a human face on the deportation tragedy, that “Sanctuary is manifestation of faith in action.” A “dreamer” activist says that, thanks to sanctuary and court accompaniment, the immigrant community is starting to believe that they have white allies. And those white allies tell me that caring for Emma and providing accompaniment for her 24/7 transforms their feelings of helplessness and negativity. A loving faith community has formed around Emma, which multiplies the strength and Light within all of us. Emma is our sanctuary.

Nearly thirty years ago, I met a friend during a stopover at a busy airport. We were both working with AFSC task forces, she in one city and I in another. She was telling me about an interfaith anti-apartheid event being planned. The date and time had been chosen, the route of the march mapped out, the permits applied for, but, she said, “We haven't decided how political to be.” Without conscious thought, I heard myself telling her: “You don't decide how political to be. You decide what your conscience calls you to do. If your actions make powerful people uncomfortable, they will call you political. That's what Jesus meant, when after Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ he replied, ‘You said it, I didn't.’” (As a Jew, I was more than a little surprised to hear myself preaching the Christian Gospel.)

From within our sanctuary, we can't see our position in the political landscape – and we certainly can't choose it. If our act of sanctuary really does find a place in the national conversation about undocumented Americans, we will hear about it from our detractors, not just from our supporters. And that will tell us that we are part of a shifting landscape. ❖

Marian Bock is a co-clerk of the Sanctuary Task Force of Albuquerque Monthly Meeting (IMYM).