

HOW TO STAND WITH IMMIGRANTS: A SANCTUARY STARTER PACKET FOR CHURCHES

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR CONGREGATIONS SEEKING TO OFFER REFUGE,
SOLIDARITY, AND JUSTICE



CHRISTIANS for
SOCIAL ACTION

INTRODUCTION

Jesus invites us into his ministry of peace and reconciliation across borders and nationalities. Just as he made us — who were once strangers — members of his household, we too can welcome the migrant and practice radical hospitality to the Lord's people so that none have need. By acting as churches that fulfill Matthew 25 — feeding the hungry, inviting in the stranger, and caring for the prisoner — we can offer a countercultural vision of God's kingdom to our polarized society.

Christians have always been called to welcome the stranger and to stand with compassion alongside those in danger and those who are unjustly treated. As immigrants today face unprecedented surveillance, coercion, and family separation, churches have an opportunity to act faithfully by returning to an ancient and deeply biblical practice: sanctuary.

This small guide offers historical insight, scriptural grounding, practical steps, and reflection for congregations wanting to provide refuge and solidarity in their communities.

This guide is based on the article, [“Sanctuary Then and Now: What 19th-Century Chinese Christians Teach Us About Protecting Immigrants Today,”](#) authored by Caleb Hui and Sam Chao. Please read the article prior to enagaging with this starter packet.

THE 2025 ESCALATION IN DETENTIONS AND DEPORTATIONS

The current administration's policies of mass deportation and detention have resulted in a climate of fear and trauma among our immigrant communities today.

As of September 2025, the government reported that it deported about 400,000 persons, with another 1.6 million having self-deported. In addition, the number of those detained by ICE in for-profit prisons could reach a record high of 106,000 in January 2026.

Yet the government's own official records show that almost half of those detained have no criminal record. ICE regularly unlawfully detains innocent persons without the right to due process.

These aren't merely political statistics. They represent families, neighbors, and members of the Body of Christ who are hurting. Tragically, these persons are often asylum seekers and refugees fleeing war, violence, or persecution.

They include vulnerable people needing Temporary Protected Status (TPS) due to war or natural disaster and DACA students who arrived in the U.S. as children with family. They may have been welcomed initially as allies in American military involvement in Afghanistan but are now rejected.

Despite their already precarious situations, the enforcement of these severe policies have

- disappeared persons to foreign prisons and to countries that they've never known;
- permanently separated families, including 1,360 children separated at the border but never reunited;
- placed 600 children behind bars; and
- punished American siblings in Christ, with eight out of 10 deportees being Christian.

WHY AND HOW CHURCHES HAVE HISTORICALLY OFFERED SANCTUARY

In light of this suffering, we are called as followers of Jesus to discern how we might respond with compassion and justice. God's amazing grace toward us — who are no longer strangers but members of God's household — serves as a model for how we might care for migrants (Eph. 2:19).

In order to protect innocent persons and individuals from severe and inhumane punishments, God has invited us to become sanctuaries of holiness and to practice radical hospitality, just as God did when directing Joshua to establish "cities of refuge" for those who accidentally killed others (Josh. 20:2–3).

God exhorts us to practice hospitality especially toward immigrants (Exod. 22:21) and to share with the Lord's people in need (Rom. 12:13).

As our models, Jesus and countless others have engaged in civil disobedience in order to obey God's higher commands for love, grace, and holiness (Mark 3:4).

Indeed, the American church has a long history of sanctuary, including:

- American Underground Railroad that transported enslaved African Americans in the 19th century;
- Settlement Movement that protected Chinese American women and children in the early 20th century;
- Sanctuary Movement that offered refuge to Salvadoran asylees in the late 20th century.

In each of these moments, the church's courageous efforts bore witness to God's salvation and mercy. Let us now also reflect God's hospitality and holiness.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. SANCTUARY IS ANCIENT.

God first welcomed us as strangers and adopted us (Eph. 2:19). We are to remember our key identity as exiles (1 Pet. 2:11), and thus should love fellow foreigners with empathy (Exod. 23:9). Not only should we provide migrants provision and justice (Deut. 24:19), but we are also to establish cities of refuge for persons requiring protection (Josh. 20:2–3).

2. SANCTUARY IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

The Underground Railroad was a secret network for African American freedom seekers to escape slavery in the South. Congregations, especially Black churches, provided sanctuary and shelter. Later, the Settlement Movement welcomed immigrants and provided needed services in low-income neighborhoods. Cameron House in San Francisco's Chinatown, as one example, took in and housed 3000 Chinese young women. In the 1980s, churches in the Sanctuary Movement offered safe havens and housing for Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum seekers.

3. SANCTUARY IS BIBLICALLY MANDATED.

Leviticus 19:34 mandates that foreigners should be treated as native-born and loved. Zephaniah 7:10 likewise directs that the marginalized — the widow, fatherless, foreigner, or poor — should not be oppressed. Jesus himself stated in Matthew 25 that when we feed the hungry, invite in the stranger, and look after the prisoner, we serve him.

4. SANCTUARY HAS ALWAYS INVOLVED RISK.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:10). The Pharisees and teachers of the law became enraged when Jesus healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:11). Nevertheless, Jesus endorsed civil disobedience to Sabbath laws when given the opportunity to heal and do good (Luke 6:9).

5. SANCTUARY TRANSFORMS LIVES ACROSS GENERATIONS.

Despite the king of Jericho’s orders to turn in enemies, Rahab hid and protected two Hebrew spies sent by Joshua. In return for her courage and kindness, the spies agreed to protect her and her family if she hung a scarlet rope from her window. Rahab, a Canaanite and a model of faith, becomes an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). Similarly, Wong So’s family received long-term blessings of justice and care.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SANCTUARY AND HOSPITALITY

OLD TESTAMENT

Joshua 20:1–9 — Cities of refuge

God commands safe spaces for those fleeing violence or unjust harm. Those who accidentally or unintentionally killed someone could escape vengeance from the victim's family by entering a city of refuge. Churches, too, can be sites of sanctuary for those fleeing unjust detention and deportation.

Deuteronomy 10:18–19 — Love the sojourner

God's people love immigrants because God loves the marginalized. God repeatedly commands that widows, orphans, and foreigners — the most vulnerable in society, without status or means of support — should be cared for. Politicians today dehumanize migrants, who often must take low-wage jobs that Americans do not want.

Leviticus 19:33–34 — Treat foreigners as native-born

Scripture offers full dignity, belonging, and justice to foreigners, not merely conditional welcome. Levitical law required justice and provision for foreigners, including a tithe to support their well-being. In contrast, current policies deprive non-citizens of the constitutional rights that American citizens enjoy.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SANCTUARY AND HOSPITALITY

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 2:13–15 — The Holy Family as refugees

Jesus' own life begins with fleeing political violence. In the middle of the night, Joseph and Mary escape Herod's command to execute Jewish babies as they flee to Egypt. Without proper status, Joseph and Mary's family would likely be barred from entering the U.S. today.

Hebrews 13:3 — Remember those in chains

Sanctuary is solidarity, not charity. Those seeking asylum in the U.S. must check in regularly with ICE. ICE now detains individuals even when they are following official rules and have no criminal record. The church can take up the critical need to look after the prisoner in for-profit detention centers.

Matthew 25:35 — “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

Welcoming immigrants is welcoming Christ. Scripture reminds us that some have entertained angels through hospitality. Likewise, we welcome Christ when we offer support and hospitality to the stranger.

Acts 5:29 — “We must obey God rather than human beings.”

When state policy conflicts with Christ's commands, civil disobedience is a duty. The midwives of Israel, Daniel and his friends, and Jesus with his disciples each broke laws in order to obey God's higher call to love and justice. God's executive orders to love foreigners and practice hospitality trump Trump's executive orders.

FIVE WAYS CONGREGATIONS AND MEMBERS CAN PROTECT VULNERABLE IMMIGRANTS NOW

We recognize that some congregations may be hesitant about the risks of offering sanctuary and hospitality to non-citizen neighbors. Some of these concerns are addressed in the FAQs. The recommendations below offer practical ways congregations can begin to stand with those facing deportation.

1. PROVIDE EMERGENCY FUNDS AND PRACTICAL SUPPORT.

Sanctuary involves providing any form of protection and support to vulnerable migrants; it includes offering physical housing but much more as well. Because of ICE enforcement, immigrants fear going out to work, school, stores, and even church.

Consequently, families face economic distress, food insecurity, and the trauma of family separation. Sanctuary support for immigrant families can include:

- providing short-term financial support for food, rent, or legal fees;
- shopping for necessities;
- accompanying students to school;
- informing immigrants of their own rights; and
- refusing ICE entry into your own churches.

2. ACCOMPANY IMMIGRANTS AT ICE CHECK-INS OR COURT HEARINGS.

The ministry of presence is a powerful witness that God and God's people stand with immigrants in their time of trial and suffering. Even if one cannot provide bilingual or legal advice, joining with immigrants reassures them that God is with them.

- A "church presence" may offer a shield against coercive detention.
- Volunteer teams can rotate accompaniment to make the ministry sustainable.
- Partnership with local immigrant-rights organizations leverages volunteer support.

3. OFFER PHYSICAL SANCTUARY AND TEMPORARY HOUSING.

Congregations have historically been sanctuary spaces, but the Trump administration has given ICE discretion to enter houses of worship to carry out surveillance, arrests, and raids. While courts decide on lawsuits by churches to protect their religious freedom, congregations can still establish places within their buildings that ICE agents cannot enter.

ICE agents may enter public spaces that are open to congregants but cannot enter private areas. Congregations should:

- clearly delineate what areas are private;
- state hours that areas are open to the public.

4. CREATE A RAPID RESPONSE/VIGIL TEAM.

Rapid response teams can appear peacefully at locations where ICE agents are present to warn the public and protect families.

These teams serve migrants by:

- providing prayer, worship, and encouragement;
- offering moral witness against injustice;
- helping prevent unlawful detentions and disappearances.

5. PRAY, ADVOCATE, AND EDUCATE.

Following the model of the persistent widow (Luke 18), churches can pray faithfully for immigrants facing injustice. Prayer is a form of advocacy.

Congregations can:

- endorse statements of solidarity;
- write pardon letters to governors;
- support sanctuary legislation;
- partner with immigrant-led organizations.

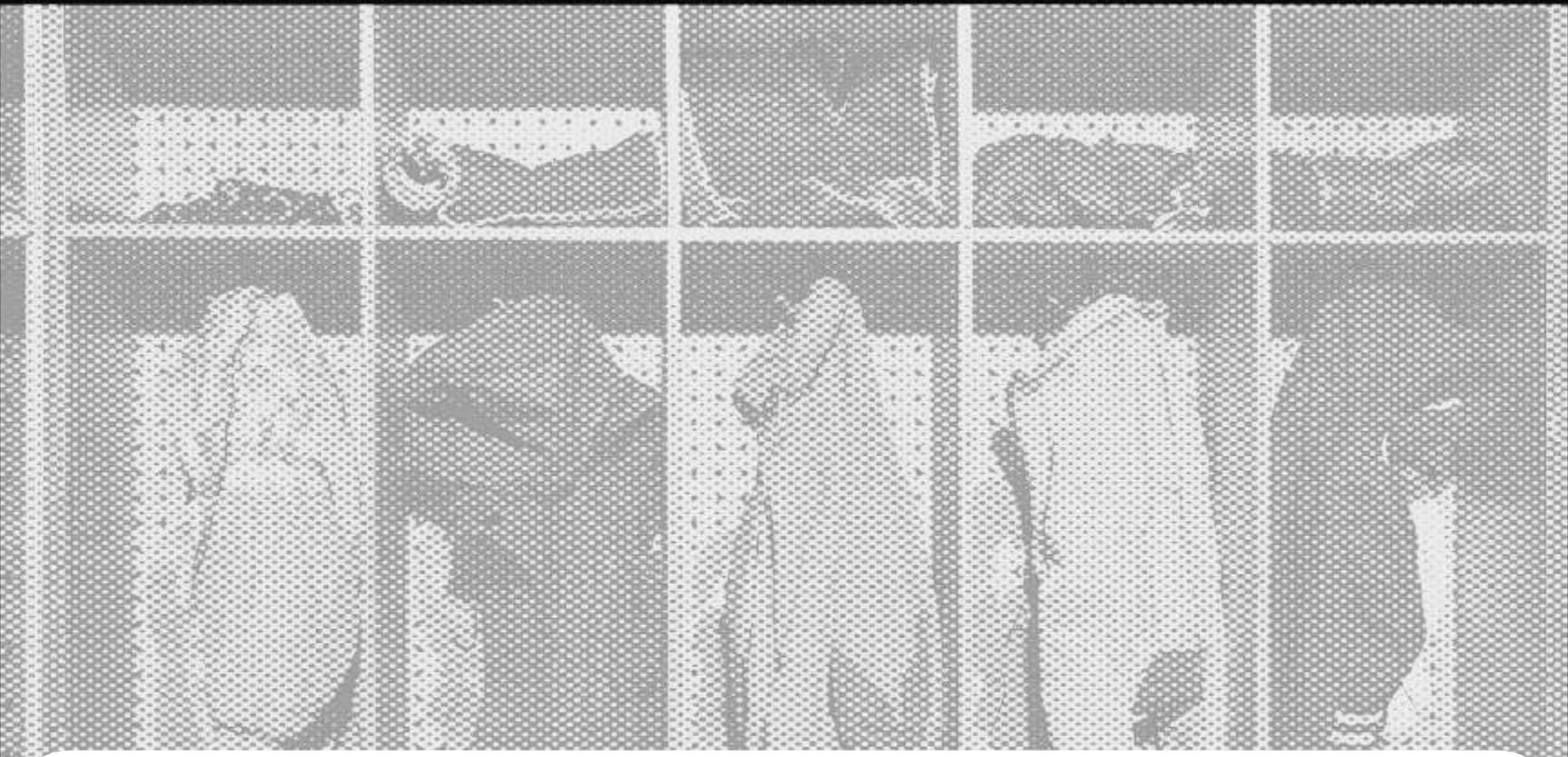
A CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER OF SOLIDARITY

A PRAYER OF SANCTUARY

God of Refuge,
you sheltered your people in the wilderness.
You protected the Holy Family as they fled violence.
You call us to remember the detained
as if we were detained with them.

Give us courage to offer sanctuary —
not in word only, but in embodied love.
Make our church a safe haven for the vulnerable,
a place where justice takes root
and mercy is lived out in full.

Amen.



FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

SEE "AN INTRODUCTION FOR CHURCHES CONSIDERING 'SANCTUARY' MINISTRIES" BY THE BAPTIST JOINT COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ANSWERS:

1. *What does a designation as "sanctuary" mean?*
2. *What legal protection does a sanctuary designation provide?*
3. *What types of laws does a church violate if it offers sanctuary to undocumented residents?*
4. *What is most important to keep in mind if my church wants to become a "sanctuary church"?*

SEE "SANCTUARY CONGREGATIONS AND HARBORING FAQS" & "IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT GUIDANCE FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP" BY THE AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION FOR ANSWERS:

1. *What risks are there if a faith group makes a public declaration as a "sanctuary" for immigrants?*
2. *What are the implications related to harboring and transporting if our congregation chooses to engage in these?*



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- WHERE DO I NOTICE FEAR SHAPING MY RESPONSE TO IMMIGRANTS — PERSONALLY, CONGREGATIONALLY, OR COMMUNALLY — AND WHERE MIGHT GOD BE INVITING TRUST INSTEAD? (MATT. 25:35; HEB. 13:3)
- WHEN I HEAR THE WORD “SANCTUARY,” WHAT EMOTIONS OR ASSUMPTIONS RISE UP IN ME — AND HOW DO THOSE COMPARE WITH SCRIPTURE’S VISION OF REFUGE AND HOSPITALITY? (JOSH. 20:1–9; LEV. 19:33–34)
- WHO ARE THE “STRANGERS” GOD HAS ALREADY PLACED NEAR US — IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS, SCHOOLS, WORKPLACES, OR CHURCHES — AND HOW ARE WE CURRENTLY RESPONDING TO THEM? (DEUT. 10:18–19; EPH. 2:19)
- WHAT RISKS — REAL OR PERCEIVED — DO I ASSOCIATE WITH OFFERING HOSPITALITY OR SOLIDARITY, AND HOW DOES JESUS’ OWN EXAMPLE SPEAK INTO THOSE FEARS? (MATT. 5:10; LUKE 6:9)
- IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT SANCTUARY BE LESS ABOUT PROVIDING SOLUTIONS AND MORE ABOUT PRACTICING PRESENCE, ACCOMPANIMENT, AND FAITHFULNESS? (HEB. 13:3; ROM. 12:13)
- HOW DOES REMEMBERING THAT JESUS HIMSELF WAS A REFUGEE RESHAPE THE WAY I THINK ABOUT IMMIGRATION, BORDERS, AND BELONGING? (MATT. 2:13–15)
- WHAT IS ONE CONCRETE STEP — SMALL OR SIGNIFICANT — THAT I, OUR GROUP, OR OUR CHURCH COULD TAKE IN THE NEXT THREE MONTHS TO STAND MORE FAITHFULLY WITH VULNERABLE IMMIGRANTS? (MIC. 6:8; ACTS 5:29)

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