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Faith, Refuge, & Resistance: The Innovations and Impact of the Modern-Day Sanctuary Movement

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Historically speaking, faith-based and community organizations have been committed to assisting immigrants and refugees as these populations acquaint themselves with a new culture and land. Over the last decades, these organizations have demonstrated a genuine concern with keeping immigrant families together, especially given the social, economic, and political challenges immigrants face as newcomers to the United States. What are some of the ways, however, in which faith-based and community organizations have offered their assistance?

Richard Alba, Albert J. Raboteau, and Josh De Wind claim in [Immigration and Religion in America](#) that religious congregations have been instrumental in promoting “ethnic community building” (p. 5), serving as important spaces for the preservation of cultural identity. The same could be said of community organizations (of which religious congregations are a subset) regarding their work in the immigrant community. S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Irene Bloemraad maintain in [Civic Hopes and Political Realities](#) that community organizations have also provided opportunities for immigrant civic and political engagement. One need look no farther than [the Sanctuary Movement](#) of the 1980s, whereby religious congregations set the stage for continued activity today. These congregations demonstrated that they had a dual – and corresponding – responsibility as places offering refuge and participating in nonviolent resistance.

[According to Charles Hirschman](#), religious congregations have played an important role as sites of “refuge, respectability, and resources” (p. 1228)¹ for immigrant communities. In the 1980s, those

congregations taking part in the Sanctuary Movement linked the refuge they were providing asylees and their families – fleeing conflict zones in Central America – to civil resistance. A faith-based justification for participating in this movement was the biblical mandate of “welcoming the stranger” (e.g., Lev. 19:34; Mt. 25: 31-46).

Note that at this time, asylees (who were, essentially, undocumented immigrants) were not given the opportunity to pursue legal status as refugees. Congregations offered shelter and protection to these immigrants, helping them integrate into the multifaceted aspects of life in a new land. [Sophie Pirie writes](#) that Quaker Jim Corbett and Reverend John Fife, pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, were co-founders of the Sanctuary Movement. According to Pirie, the movement drew its strength not only from congregations displaying their opposition to parts of U.S. foreign policy, but also from the use of storytelling by those Central Americans seeking refuge in the United States.

Tracing its beginnings to Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson in 1982, the Sanctuary Movement, [by 1986](#), was interfaith in nature and counted over 300 congregations among its supporters. Religious congregations at present have reclaimed the legacy and tactics of the Sanctuary Movement. The [modern-day Sanctuary Movement boasts over 800 faith communities](#) and is united in its efforts to oppose the indiscriminate deportations of undocumented immigrants taking place under the Trump administration. In [Prophetic Activism](#), Helene Slessarev-Jamir addresses the rationale behind the establishment of a modern-day or “new” Sanctuary Movement. She writes that an interfaith group (with broad religious representation) met in Washington, D.C. in 2007, pledging themselves to defend immigrant families against the threat of deportation. This group vowed to continue such efforts until the passage of Comprehensive Immigration Reform legislation (p. 151).

Posted on the main website of the modern-day Sanctuary Movement is the [Immigration Raids Rapid Response](#), a toolkit influenced by the New Sanctuary Movement (NSM) of Philadelphia’s [Sanctuary in the Streets initiative](#). An interfaith coalition, NSM instituted this initiative in May 2016, in response to then Obama-era deportations. The Immigration Raids Rapid Response toolkit lays out specific tactics in preparing and executing a rapid response strategy, including the establishment of a hotline and the timely use of social media. Guided by the goals of solidarity (working together in a spirit of justice) and accompaniment (supporting those immigrants facing deportation and/or referring them to legal services), this toolkit also calls attention to interfaith prayer vigils and responding to raids with a “prophetic and bold voice.”

With the fate of Sanctuary jurisdictions (cities, counties, and states) under increased scrutiny by the Trump administration, participants in the modern-day Sanctuary Movement have put into place *micro-innovations* at the local level – such as NSM’s Sanctuary in the Streets initiative – demonstrating a threefold commitment to *advocacy, accompaniment, and action*. To begin with, Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) researchers Lena Graber and Nikki Marquez maintain in [Searching for Sanctuary](#) that there is no uniform definition as to what constitutes a Sanctuary jurisdiction. Indeed, Graber and Marquez state that even those areas claiming that they are Sanctuary jurisdictions may “voluntarily offer substantial assistance to federal immigration enforcement” (p. 3). These researchers find that county-level policies may range from prohibiting detainer requests from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), to barring the use of local resources in immigration enforcement efforts (p. 5).

Notwithstanding [Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney’s reinstatement](#) of a 2014 executive order which placed limits on Philadelphia’s cooperation with ICE detainer requests, [over 100 undocumented](#)

[immigrants were arrested](#) in the city during Operation Safe City – a series of ICE raids targeting ten Sanctuary city locations in late September 2017. A few days after the raid, [NSM's response](#) was to demonstrate peacefully and prayerfully outside of the ICE offices in Philadelphia by constructing a sukkah, or tent-like structure, as the Jewish community was celebrating the feast of Sukkot at that time. This local demonstration showcases NSM's use of cultural micro-innovations. Furthermore, it confirms what Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair write in [Innovation and Scaling for Impact](#) that innovations arise in uncertain environments and successful innovations produce “new products, services, or interventions that have potential for positive impact” (p. 2).

Having celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2017, NSM has demonstrated an attention to developing innovative practices at the local level in response to an immigration climate marked not by family unification but rather by deportations. In addition to providing [accompaniment services](#), NSM also offers [Know Your Rights trainings](#) to inform immigrants of their civil rights and to advance the principles of immigration justice. Furthermore, the organization has established a [New Leadership School](#) dedicated to training emerging immigrant leaders in skills related to advocacy, accompaniment, and action. These micro-innovations go a long way in building community presence and garnering the support of allies invested in advancing immigration justice. The benefit of these micro-innovations is that they can be felt locally. And yet, their impact may also reverberate nationally, as in the example of the Immigration Raids Rapid Response toolkit.

In the Catholic tradition, congregations oftentimes receive strategic guidance from global and national faith-based organizations as to ways to participate in immigrant justice efforts. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia's involvement in the Share the Journey campaign is case in point. A global initiative of [Caritas Internationalis](#), this two year campaign (September 2017-2019) is a direct response to Pope Francis' invitation to encounter and develop friendships with migrants and refugees. [In the United States](#), the campaign is a collaborative effort of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA, and Catholic Relief Services. Similarly, the mission of the national movement is to respond to “the Pope's call to encounter and walk with these migrants and refugees in support and solidarity.” One such local initiative (and micro-innovation) relating to this campaign was the [Reach Out social media campaign](#) which took place in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia during the week of September 18, 2017. This social media campaign – introduced on Archbishop Charles Chaput's Facebook page – welcomed parishes to take pictures together as a group, holding hands and facing outwards in a circle. Those pictures would then be shared on social media with the hashtag #ReachOut to demonstrate parish-level support of the lived experience of immigrants and refugees.

Another faith-based organization responding to Pope Francis' call of encounter is the [Aquinas Center](#), located in an immigrant-dense neighborhood in South Philadelphia. Inspired by [core values](#) of “hospitality, solidarity, responsiveness, and transformation,” the Aquinas Center [provides](#), among other offerings, leadership development, Know Your Rights workshops, a range of educational programs, and urban immersion experiences on-site. Like NSM, the Aquinas Center is providing a space for both refuge and resistance. Participation in acts of resistance is demonstrated visibly in the organization's communal mural entitled “[Companions on the Journey](#),” which colorfully depicts the experience of immigration, most notably displayed in the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt (Mt. 2: 13-15). Originally unveiled at the time of Aquinas Center's founding in 2013, the mural, another instance of a micro-innovation, received new additions in 2018 as a result of the efforts of the Aquinas Center Mural Corps. Central to these additions was the inclusion of quotes from community members to document the present-day challenges of immigration. These quotes were incorporated into the

artwork, thereby giving life to the images portrayed in the mural. Such an emphasis on storytelling is reminiscent of strategies employed by participants in the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. Storytelling also drives home the important “theme of connection to the homeland” (p. 6), as noted by Alba, Raboteau, and De Wind (2009).

Micro-innovations in the immigration field require strategic, visionary, and resolute leadership. Innovations demand careful planning, goal orientation, and determination on the part of individuals, as well as organizations and coalitions. Faith-based and community organizations have demonstrated their commitment to providing refuge and resistance for immigrants and their families through advocacy, accompaniment, and action. In applying strategic insights from [literature on nonprofit self-coaching](#) to immigrant-serving organizations, one can begin to understand, with Seelos and Mair (2018), the process that is innovation. One can also observe innovation’s “impact creation,” that is the benefits that accrue from innovation to individuals and the larger community (p. 21).

In [“Self-Coaching Strategies for Nonprofit Leaders,”](#) Jean Lobell, Mohan Sikka, and Pavitra Menon develop a three-part plan for driving change: (1) reframing the issue, (2) engaging in “1-2-3 steps,” or those steps which at right at one’s disposal, and (3) consulting off-the-job resources. In the examples highlighted above, while effecting a national change in public policy has not been possible, faith-based organizations have succeeded in reframing the issue of unauthorized immigration from one of illegality to that of accompanying one’s community residents at the local level, through a range of educational and cultural offerings. Similarly, faith-based organizations have steered the issue away from breaking the law and towards keeping immigrant families together. Avoiding the pitfalls of reinventing the wheel, these organizations have been able to put into place “1-2-3 steps,” through a reliance on the usefulness of sacred spaces (also critical in the case of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s) and the translation of biblical mandates into actionable initiatives.

Finally, these organizations have counted upon helpful resources, such as coalitions formed with community stakeholders, as well as lessons learned from global and national faith-based organizations serving immigrant populations. In so doing, these faith-based organizations have created a competing script regarding the valued presence of undocumented immigrants in our midst. And this script requires prayerful reflection and solidarity to drive impact, today, as it has in the past.

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¹ Hirschman attributes the formulation of “refuge, respectability, and resources” to sociologist Alejandro Portes.