CHURCH OF SANCTUARY

CREATING CULTURES OF WELCOME, HOSPITALITY AND SAFETY

Church of Sanctuary is a faith-based initiative, a call to prophetic Christian witness. It is an expression of hospitality as a clear challenge to hostility.

The aim is to take steps to build protective hospitality in ways that are mutually enriching. The hope is that churches will become places for all and proud to foster welcome, hospitality and safety to people fleeing violence and persecution. This would be a clear demonstration of Christian discipleship.

- The Christian tradition of Sanctuary is deep
- It is rooted in the Hebrew concept of Cities of Refuge (Numbers 35, Joshua 20)
- It is related to safeguarding, protection and hospitality.

The idea of Sanctuary is an important ecclesial concept, enshrined in theology. The association of sanctuary and holiness is universally recognised. Where God is honoured holiness is centred on the presence of God (Exodus 25:8). Hospitality is holiness in action, it is a holy act of solidarity.

WHY BECOME A CHURCH OF SANCTUARY?

- Sanctuary, or hospitality-with-safety, is a long-standing prophetic theme of Scripture
- It is the most repeated ethical requirement in the Hebrew Scriptures. The foundation is: love your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 19:18) and love the stranger as yourself (Leviticus 19:34)
- This is echoed in Jesus' teaching about how we treat the neighbour and the outsider (Matthew 25:35-40; Luke 10:29-37).

Sanctuary in churches used to assist those claiming to be innocent of a crime. More recently it has operated to protect immigrants or refugees facing deportation by the state. Now we need Sanctuary Churches who wish to greet new arrivals fleeing from danger to their lives.

- We need sanctuary for all vulnerable people
- The Hebrew prophets consistently demanded justice for “the widow, the orphan and the stranger”
- Today these groups include vulnerable older people, children in danger, and “asylum seekers” and refugees.

Who are the people lacking financial communal, emotional, and other support, or feel isolated? The priority of providing safety to older people and children is increasingly recognized. The challenge to provide safety for refugees and all those seeking sanctuary must not be neglected.

WHAT IS A CHURCH OF SANCTUARY?

Churches take pride in welcoming all. Many churches go beyond welcome and are thoroughly engaged with supporting refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

What value is added by becoming a recognised Church of Sanctuary?

- It further strengthens and embeds your ethos and culture of welcome, hospitality and safety
- It connects you to the Church of Sanctuary network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), the wider City of Sanctuary network, and the wider community engaging with refugees and people seeking sanctuary
- It takes you on a journey to build collaboration, to know you are part of a movement endorsed by a diverse range of people

You will become part of a movement to build cultures of welcome and hospitality. You will be enabled to engage in more informed ways with serious issues that matter to you. You will connect refugees and people seeking sanctuary to support networks and agencies.

In a Church of Sanctuary all members of the congregation intentionally work together to:

- **Learn** about real life stories of refugees and people seeking sanctuary, and engage with others to work from facts not fiction
- **Embed** the values and cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety as part of the values of your congregation and community. You will use these to support refugees and people seeking sanctuary, and include them in your activities

- **Share** with pride your vision, commitment and achievements, and let others know about the positive contributions of refugees to society and the benefits of welcoming others.

Note that all members engage in this work. It is not left to those who hold office, or to people who particularly hold a passion for this work. Buildings can provide shelter but sanctuary is best provided in human warmth, community and relationships. Individuals and single congregations can provide hospitality, but this is stronger when it is in collaboration with others, and a two-way process of mutuality and solidarity.

Church of Sanctuary is not a campaigning political movement. It is a biblically inspired initiative, it is about being prophetic, challenging hostility with hospitality. This can mean we become political, and this is in keeping with the style of biblical prophets, speaking truth to power with passion and compassion, seeking justice.

Church of Sanctuary is not about opening up buildings for people to live in. It is about building communities of hospitality and sanctuary. Human warmth and welcome are the sanctuary we all hold and bring into relationships.

We remain conscious of the vulnerabilities of further harm to people already hurting when safeguards and precautions are not respected.

PROCESS OF BECOMING A CHURCH OF SANCTUARY

Learning and working together to grow cultures of welcome and hospitality is rewarding. This should be your focus, more than the Church of Sanctuary award.

- Don't rush the process
- It will be helpful to discuss things with congregations that have the Church of Sanctuary recognition
- It is essential to engage the whole congregation with all your discussions, activities and prayers

Sanctuary Sunday, traditionally the Sunday at the end of Refugee Week in June each year, could be used to raise and launch the idea of becoming a Church of Sanctuary. The congregation can make a commitment to spend the following twelve months exploring what it means to be a Church of Sanctuary by:

- The decision-making body/trustees agreeing to explore becoming a Church of Sanctuary
- Inviting/appointing 3 or 4 members to form a small steering group to assist the congregation
- Agreeing together a simple vision and mission statement

Keep a broad, inclusive reach. Ensure people seeking sanctuary and refugees are integral to the discussions and developments as far as possible. Church of Sanctuary is about working together, not what we do for others but what we do together.

- You could explore the biblical basis of the idea of sanctuary. Resources are available for this on the website noted below
- You could learn about the City of Sanctuary movement and pledge your support. Details are available on the City of Sanctuary website
- Give attention to all that your congregation is already doing to build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety for all

At the following Sanctuary Sunday, 12 months on, the congregation can be briefed on progress, and make a commitment to further development. Invite refugees to share their stories, listen, learn together.

- You might decide to apply for Church of Sanctuary recognition. The application form is not a tick box exercise, it remains a learning exercise.
- At all stages ensure people seeking sanctuary, and refugees are involved, and as far as possible, work in partnership with City of Sanctuary.
- Your congregation can engage in this work with other congregations in your area and seek to become a Parish/Circuit of Sanctuary. Your congregation can twin with one that supports refugees

The whole process is about learning together. There are suggestions to assist this process in the book Hospitality and Sanctuary for All (see under **Support and Resources available**)

The award has value as a statement by your congregation. It is about your inclusive values of welcome, hospitality and safety for all. It is something to celebrate and to share - your award will be an inspiration and encouragement to others. In the process you will build and strengthen refugee voices and leadership.

The award is not the end of the process. It is an important stage on an ongoing pilgrimage. It's not about getting a certificate to display, as for example in the eco church initiative. It's more about learning together and building communities of sanctuary.

Inderjit Bhogal

June 2023

APPENDIX

EXPERIENCES

One small congregation explored the whole process in the context of Sunday worship. Over four months, they devoted one Sunday a month to the four themes outlined in Hospitality and Sanctuary for All. Already involved in supporting refugees, this process engaged the whole congregation to explore the key issues with thought and prayer. Following this they commenced the application for Church of Sanctuary recognition.

"It is very humbling for us to become the first Methodist Church and Circuit of Sanctuary in the world. The value of this recognition and award lies in the fact that we have made a commitment to live out God's purpose to offer hospitality, kindness, love and sanctuary to all through our witness and service. It also offers us an opportunity to work for and with refugees identifying and responding to their needs, embracing everybody just as they are. Furthermore, it challenges us to share the greatest commandment "love your neighbour" with those fleeing violence, conflict and persecution and to offer a safe space to them. This journey has also given us the privilege of collaborating and working closely with a wide range of local groups and organisations in the community to work towards a shared and common goal."

(Ms Deeptima Massey, EDI Officer, Brighton and Hove Circuit, and South East Methodist District)

"Aside from our desire to be a welcoming place at the level of each individual, we also seek to continue to collaborate with the Irish Refugee Council, Places of Sanctuary and other organisations so that we can be a part of a movement to build a greater sense of welcome and care."

(Rev Abigail Sines: Dean's Vicar, Christ Church Cathedral of Sanctuary, Dublin)

"We are a Church of Sanctuary, this is who we are, embedded, enriched congregation, we take pride in who we are, a blessed enriched congregation and community. Being inclusive is natural and a joy. It encourages others to follow the example. It is simple, joyful, natural. More opportunities to serve, to advocate, and to celebrate have come our way since we took this step."

(Pastor Gerard Goshawk: Six Ways Erdington Baptist Church, Birmingham, a Church of Sanctuary)

SUPPORT AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Use the Hospitality and Sanctuary for All study guide, available for a donation from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

Check out the Church of Sanctuary and City of Sanctuary websites.

DATES FOR THE CHURCH DIARY

Refugee Week, usually third week of June each year. See Refugee Week/Refugee Council websites for latest information

Sanctuary Sunday is observed at the end of Refugee Week. It is an opportunity for congregations to focus worship and prayer on issues raised by the experiences of refugees, to include and learn from refugees.

Sanctuary Sunday was established jointly by the Refugee Council, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and City of Sanctuary, and is supported by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland as part of the development and promotion of Church of Sanctuary.