

PLYMOUTH STATEMENT ON
BECOMING AN IMMIGRANT WELCOMING CONGREGATION

JANUARY 28, 2018

The Cry that Called Us

Over the last two years, members of the Immigration Ministry Team at Plymouth Congregational UCC in Fort Collins became increasingly aware of and deeply concerned about the effects of the new, expansive levels of enforcement by ICE in the immigrant community of Northern Colorado. We heard Dreamers (DACA participants) speak of their dramatically increased fears as their futures became more jeopardized. We listened to the anguish of families whose breadwinners were deported, leaving them terrified and anxious about their future. We learned about children being separated from their parents at detention centers with the admitted intent of intimidating immigrants into voluntary deportation. We visited with and supported an immigrant in Sanctuary in Fort Collins. During that time her partner/husband was also targeted by ICE and detained.

Clearly, a catastrophe was occurring among immigrant families throughout the U.S. Largely unseen by the non-immigrant community, the consequences of the increased enforcement against non-criminal immigrant neighbors is very real and frightening.

We are called to live fully the Gospel announced and lived by Jesus. We accompany, advocate for and stand with the least among us, our most vulnerable neighbors: immigrants.

The History That Led Us

Plymouth Congregational UCC Church was founded on the faith of immigrant forbears. The German Evangelical Congregational Church in Fort Collins was established in 1904 by a group of Volga Deutch (German Russians) who had migrated to Colorado from southern Russia. This was their second migration. Their first emigration, from Germany to Russia in search of religious and political freedom, had followed the Seven Year War (1756-73). They prospered there, but the situation changed, economically and politically, leading them to relocate once again. These “Volga Germans” settled largely in the plains and prairies of the Midwest, but some made their way to Weld and Larimer Counties. Many such congregations aligned with the Congregationalists, whose flexibility made it possible for them to continue worshipping in German and maintain their long-standing form of worship.

When the German Evangelical congregation became part of the United Church of Christ, they chose to be called “Plymouth Congregational” in order to align themselves with the immigrants who became the first Congregationalists in the 1600s in Massachusetts.

The Action That Moved Us

That solidarity with immigrants has continued to this day. After several years of working on immigration issues nationally and in Colorado, Plymouth has now declared itself an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation. It is the first congregation in the Rocky Mountain Conference to do so. The early focus by the Plymouth Immigration Ministry Team was on educating the congregation. Two series of Adult Ed forums and classes were held. As part of their role in leading Plymouth, the team placed a large world map in a prominent place in the Fellowship Hall. Members were invited to insert a colorful pin into the place on the map that best represented their family’s origins. One woman put a pin in the Volga Region of Russia. With that simple act, she tied her journey as part of Plymouth to that of the congregation itself. Scores of pins indicating members’ origins made the strong immigrant heritage of our church very clear.

Clearly, however, more was to be done. The idea emerged to move the congregation toward a declaration of its commitments. A statement was drafted and preliminary drafts were circulated and addressed in classes, the church newsletter, and from the pulpit. At the annual congregational meeting on January 28, the brief statement below was adopted by unanimous vote with one amendment.

The Critical Challenges Ahead

In a message to the congregation the following day, Rev. Jane Anne Ferguson stated: *“The task now is to live more fully into all three of the congregation’s declarations of who we are as an extravagantly welcoming Body of Christ.”* The statement, she said, *“empowers us all to step out more boldly in ministry”* and *“to take actions on behalf of Plymouth in areas of education, mission, ministry and proclamation in the world.”*

Plymouth is located on the southern edge of the Colorado State University campus. A right wing speaker was scheduled to speak at CSU in early February. Within hours of the vote, Plymouth was asked to host an interfaith gathering to witness to Fort Collins’ own commitments to diversity and justice. Plymouth’s neighbor, the Islamic Center of Fort Collins, was one of several groups that had been warned by the university of possible hostility during the speaker’s time on campus. A broadly representative gathering heard from a diverse group of religious and community leaders. Both the vigil at Plymouth and on-campus protest and counter-protest events were peaceful, but the speaker did attract white supremacist supporters who arrived in battle gear, fomenting some violence that was quickly put to rest by police.

In the coming days and weeks, Plymouth Congregational UCC will seek to accompany immigrants and their families as, together, we face an unjust immigration system and continue to call on America to live out its own immigrant heritage and values.

IMMIGRANT WELCOMING CONGREGATION STATEMENT

The members of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, Fort Collins, Colorado hear God’s Call to care for and welcome with compassion and justice the widow, orphan and the alienated who are living in our community. We follow Jesus, the Christ, who lives among the “least of these” in our communities. We affirm that each and every person is a Child of God welcome in the Realm of God’s Love. Our refugee-immigrant ancestors fled persecution; upon arriving in Colorado they established the German Evangelical Congregational Church that laid the foundation for Plymouth Congregational UCC. Therefore, Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, Fort Collins, CO declares itself an *“Immigrant Welcoming Congregation”* to encourage the development of policies and activities within Plymouth UCC dedicated to facilitating respectful, compassionate welcome and inclusion of immigrants in our midst.