

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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A Culture of Fear

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Executive Minister

Two weeks ago, UCC General Minister and President Geoffrey Black and I visited Arizona. Our purpose was to meet with and listen to church and community leaders who have been working on the various issues surrounding the passage of Arizona Senate Bill 1070. While 1070 is steeped in political debate about who is on the “right” side of the question, people are living in fear. Fear seems to be dominating the culture and climate of Arizona.

We were moved by the ongoing efforts of samaritans who go out into the heat of the desert sun to assist persons who may be injured or in need of food and water. We listened to their stories of human encounters with migrants crossing the desert, verified by our own trip into the desert where temperatures were nearing 110 degrees. We found discarded backpacks, children’s shoes, blankets, pieces of clothing, and empty water bottles; all evidence of human existence under brush and trees, in ditches, and on pathways leading northward. Saving lives is the primary mission of these courageous samaritans who want to continue their generous work but are afraid of the legal repercussions brought upon by this new Arizona law. Fear resides in circles of compassion.

Victims of crimes such as robbery and domestic violence are afraid to report it because they do not have the documents required for legal status in the United States. Organizations are doing their best to

provide information through group meetings and public forums about legal protection, but fear prevents many from attending. Information that is essential to victims is not reaching them. A resulting example is that victims of domestic violence are not aware that they are protected from deportation under federal law (Violence against Women Act). Instead they tell stories about the threats by their abusers warning that if they report the abuse, they will see to it that she is deported and lose her children. Fear prevails in the home.

We were privileged to be part of a church gathering where members came together to share a meal, demonstrating love and support to brothers and sisters making plans to leave the state or return to a country they have never known. These are families who are made up of members with differing documentation status. Some are in the legalization process, some who are citizens by birthright, and others who have lived in Arizona for decades but never had enough money to apply for legal documents. Latino church members, afraid to go to church, shared their stories of how lonely it is to no longer be able to worship with their church family. Besides loneliness, they expressed fear. Fear of arrest for no reason; fear that a loved one will be deported without notification; or fear that their children will be left behind. Fear comes into the church sanctuary.

Community and church based coalitions are larger and stronger than at anytime in recent history. They are organizing nonviolent demonstrations, candle light vigils, prayer circles, visits to elected officials, educational forums, law suits, and voter registration. While fear is the dominating factor, hope and solidarity is also evident. It was an honor to be among courageous and committed church leaders who recognize that God is a God of justice and in that truth we take comfort.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.