

From Herb Ranney

Done on my old computer. It may not come thru properly. I will gladly provide printed copy. In testing it by an email to myself I can see that there is some loss in format. It is the best I can do

Introduction

I am a very long term member of OCM. During the planning and construction of the Meeting House I was involved and active. As a consequence, I do have a keen interest in Meeting activities and utilization of the building. For me it has been a joyful experience.

Recently , two unexpected events occurred which made me consider the use of the MH facilities. I expressed my interest to the Clerks and at Meeting for Business It was agreed that there should be a broad consideration of the use of the MH by the meeting.

The two events that sparked my interest in building utilization are:

1. At about the time of the local county fair when our meeting was sponsoring an exhibit regarding the inhumanity of solitary confinement, a group of civil rights activists from Harlem were traveling to Albany to protest prison conditions. They requested permission to sleep overnight on the floor of the MH. The request was not approved and they did sleep at other churches and one night at PH. (There may be many details to the episode but that is my understanding of the essentials)
2. National political events regarding immigration and the situation of undocumented aliens. Perhaps the need for sanctuary locations.

The above two items ,although different are interconnected

Following are some of my observation, thoughts and opinions on the topic of MH utilization:

Background

The Meeting House structure was intended, designed and constructed to be a simple "church". To obtain the certificate of occupancy (C of O) it was built to meet all the applicable building codes, or parts of codes such as fire. electrical, structural. Town of Chatham, occupancy capacity, plumbing, handicapped , disability, water, health, septic, parking lot, number and size

of restrooms and probably many more. We did not plan for dormitories or scheduled weekend or overnight conferences or programs.

Emergency, unscheduled, un-anticipated use of the Meeting House

There could be, and probably will be, times when unforeseen uses of the building will be requested and/or required. This may involve overnight occupation. Consider the following few examples:

- During an evening program an ice storm comes up and makes roads treacherous or closed.
- A major storm leaves part of the community without power, water or heat and the MH remains viable. People request shelter and help.
- A national crisis arises and a small group of peace activists want to assemble or are on their way to Washington and request to sleep overnight on the floor.
- An active member residing some distance away plans to attend an early meeting and would like to drive the previous evening and simply sleep overnight on the floor,
- A member, attender or neighbor's house burns down and without assets they need shelter until morning
- Traveling, visiting Quakers would like to pitch a tent on the back lawn for overnight and have use of the restrooms.
- etc. Use your imagination

In these situations would we say "no"

Common sense dictates a positive response in some cases. If we were a commercial enterprise another answer might be appropriate.

However, we are Quakers and in responding we must consider our values, and advices.

In many situation it may not be possible to call a committee meeting to define an answer..

It all sounds silly but sooner or later a situation will arise and there should be some guidance. We did not anticipate the Harlem request and then fumbled around by email to answer "no".

At this point, without hearing options, I would trust a member to provide an appropriate evaluation and then support the decision.

The building code for the MH required one restroom for men and one for women. If we had three one could be gender neutral. Soon after the final

inspection and receiving the C of O the meeting changed the signs on the two restroom doors to indicate gender neutral. On several occasions we have probably exceeded the code occupancy limit. By themselves these actions are insignificant. However they are indicators of our willingness to stretch the limits of the codes and nibble around the edges when we deem it desirable.

Sanctuary

Overall view

- At this point in history we cannot have total unlimited immigration. The USA could not absorb and assimilate all the people in the world who might like to come here. There would be chaos etc.
- We need a sane unbiased national immigration policy. With the political conditions in our country it is doubtful it can be achieved in the near future.
- Without doubt there are undocumented aliens here for the purposes of violent criminal activity such as drug smuggling, human trafficking etc. They should not be tolerated.

The undocumented and limited stay groups

There are millions of decent undocumented individuals in this country. They are:

Doing the work and tasks Americans are reluctant to do.

Being exploited by business and industry

Working dangerous occupations such as dairy farming in NYS with a high accident rate. Meat packing in horrible conditions. etc.

Picking fruit and vegetables under conditions and at a rate of pay that Americans would not do.

Doing the menial tasks in hospitals and nursing homes.

Employed as nannies raising our children.

Fleeing death and persecution in their native country.

Developing thriving productive businesses

(and other numerous examples)

They are human beings that need help ---what can be done and what can the churches and religious organizations do to help?

History and the existing situation

It appears that with our polarized political system, with bigotry and bias

embedded, there is little chance that any meaningful comprehensive immigration policy will be enacted. There will be no just solution for undocumented aliens. It may even get worse depending on politics. Human rights organizations, civil rights groups and liberal political action groups may apply some pressure to the federal authorities. Churches and religious organizations should be in the front. At the time of the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust in Europe I believe the major religious organizations did not take united action to resist. There certainly were some courageous acts of resistance. Some convents and monasteries sheltered children from death camps. In Denmark, during one single operation the Danes rescued all the Jews in the country to sanctuary in Sweden. However there were numerous churches and institutions in Europe that just stood by and watched - or even worse approved. Are we in a similar period in history?. Meanwhile, the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) police continue, with increased vigor to round up the undocumented - many with strong positive relationships to our country
What can we do?

Action:

We do write letters and sign petitions The meeting does provide financial support for worthy causes. Some individuals contribute directly to immigration related activities. All that is great!!

The one direct hands on action we can take is to be involved in providing sanctuary. If every church in the community, county, state and United States promoted and actively provided sanctuary it might have an impact on the politicians.

Providing sanctuary is more than opening a door for a short time visit; It might involve:

Finding and paying lawyers

providing shopping and food for an extended time

perhaps child care and transportation to schools

recreation

social and psychological services

medical care and payments

costs of heat, light and electricity

tax problems

visitation arrangements

etc. etc. etc. use your imagination

Friends have mentioned a partner sanctuary. What does that mean?.- Do we initially take the person or family in during daylight and then somehow before overnight transport them to another church which will then assume all the remaining responsibilities??? Does the partner church congregation, governing body and hierarchy understand all the ramifications? Much clarification of the term "partner church" is needed !!!

The one tentative description of the partnership arrangement that I have heard seemed to indicate that for some reason our MH could not be used to house individuals in need of sanctuary. As indicated previously in this paper, our policies can be changed to meet humanitarian needs and enable us to actively demonstrate our Quaker practices and values. With creative thinking, little work, relatively small amount of money, no major construction and patience, a small part of the MH could be temporarily adapted to accommodate one person or a small family until their immigration issues are resolved. A little inconvenience but what a great opportunity to really put life in our Quaker beliefs.

Summary Thinking

Historically, churches have been a place of sanctuary - I hope that means exempt from search and seizure within. I anticipate even ICE will continue that tradition.

If an undocumented person, especially with a known history and record ,(with ICE police in pursuit) came to our Sunday Meeting for Worship and requested sanctuary -we would find it impossible to turn the request down and let ICE take the person. I understand that statement leaves a lot of room for ifs ,ands and buts)

To actively plan for, seek , encourage or express openness to sanctuary possibility is a total different situation.

I believe in Sanctuary and at age 90 would be willing to do whatever share of responsibility that I can physically and mentally accomplish..

Unfortunately , It is unclear to me how much responsibility and work for sanctuary activity our members and attenders would be willing to perform over a long period of time. Long term commitment by many would be required

The meeting has demonstrated an ability to raise money to support causes and employ others but individual extended time. work and energy is another matter.

I know members and attenders already have full lives with work, children and family responsibilities. (and rightly so).

There are many fears of different types

of the government
lack of time
legal action
courage required
insurance problems
conflict with friends and neighbors
question of confidence
of a new and unusual situation

My guess is that a great fear is of discomfort. We all have our patterns
routines and priorities. It would just be nice and peaceful if the problem of
undocumented and immigration would go away and someone else would
solve it

Where do we go from here
Herb Ranney

