

LET'S TAKE A WALK: THE MINISTRY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Walking alongside someone in a time of need can be vastly reassuring. The ministry of “accompaniment,” often provided by churches in support for immigrants facing deportation, takes the metaphor of “walking alongside” to mean a commitment to be present and bear witness to the struggle for fair treatment. With a little imagination, the accompaniment model could be stretched to include a ministry of presence to anyone who struggles, whether due to immigration woes, poverty, or addiction. Accompanying someone who feels vulnerable or threatened can offer something intangible—the gift of reassurance.

With Immigrants

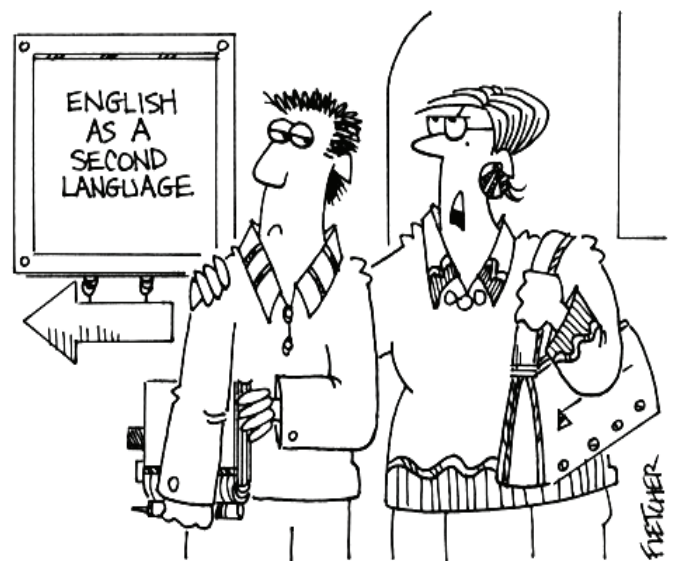
Some churches have begun recruiting volunteers to accompany immigrants faced with the possibility of deportation by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These friends of the detained are typically not lawyers and do not offer legal advice. Instead, they provide something more simple and intangible—a ministry of presence and of bearing witness for individuals who might be forced to face government attorneys alone, given that the Sixth Amendment does not guarantee immigrants the right to a lawyer. The experience can be daunting, and it is complicated by the fact that many immigrants lack basic English proficiency. Walking with such a person may not provide all the answers for them, but it may render the process a bit more humane.

Church leaders can be present with immigrants: (1) at check-ins required by ICE, (2) at court hearings for individuals who have not been detained, and (3) at court hearings for those who have already been detained. According to Sara Gozalo, an organizer who trains volunteers, accompaniment involves “advocacy without confrontation. Even if you feel like you’re not doing anything, your presence there means a lot. I promise you. It’s much harder to deport someone when people are watching.”¹

In addition to being present at court hearings, church leaders can support immigrants by accompanying families with children to school and assisting with enrollment, or sponsoring an open house for parents, teachers, and administrators to discuss ways to help. Beyond this, build a relationship with the Department of Homeland Security office by attending Community Relations Meetings sponsored by the agency. Finally, help immigrants find lawyers by holding information sessions about reputable immigration service providers.²

With Prisoners

Accompaniment methods can be used in support of ministry with prisoners. For instance, St. Anne’s Catholic Community, thirty-two miles northwest of Chicago, became involved in a program for mothers in prison that allows these mothers the opportunity to visit with their children. Sponsored by the Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, the “Visits to Mom” program provides free transportation to children whose mothers



I'LL WALK WITH YOU THROUGH THIS...
BUT, BE AWARE THAT I'VE ALWAYS STRUGGLED
WITH THE "TO"... "TOO"... AND... "TWO" DILEMMA.

are incarcerated. For volunteers from St. Anne's, this typically translates into an eleven- or twelve-hour day due to the drive required to and from the Decatur and Logan Correctional Centers. That's a three-hour round trip from Barrington to Chicago and a five-hour round trip to and from the two prisons. These visits often represent the only chance for many of these mothers, a number of them serving time for drug offenses, to see their children.³

With Others in Need

Likewise, a ministry of presence and support can be achieved through mentoring or advising for persons struggling with poverty or addiction. The West Side Campaign against Hunger (WCAH), located in the basement of the St. Paul and St. Andrew United Methodist Church in upper Manhattan, offers a supermarket-style food pantry that allows customers to choose which foods they will receive. Every new customer can receive the aid of a social service counselor who explains how to shop, how to apply for a health plan, how to find a doctor, and how to determine eligibility for federal programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and Free and Reduced Price School Meals, as well as the pantry's own programs. Mentoring may also lead customers to job training and classes in General Educational Development (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL). WCAH's social service counseling metaphorically "walks with" customers who might be confused by the complicated web of services available.

Taking the First Steps

To get started with immigrant ministry, consider offering training for volunteers using online resources from the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops campaign, or Justice for Immigrants.⁴

For prison ministry, consult with a prison chaplain before visiting a state or federal facility or read the article, "Six Rules of Thumb for Prison Ministry: Advice for Pastors and Ministry Leaders" available from the United Methodist Church's General Board of Discipleship. For a deeper dive, explore online resources for church leaders on in-prison, re-entry, family, and mentoring ministries as well as justice reform offered by Prison Fellowship, founded by Chuck Colson.⁵

For persons struggling with poverty, sponsor nutrition and cooking workshops to educate food pantry or lunch program patrons on the importance and availability of fresh food. Give referrals to free or low-cost health care and social service benefits in the area. Recruit and train patrons to become volunteers in running the program. Start community discussions on hunger, poverty, and food security using resources from organizations such as WhyHunger and Bread for the World, both of which focus on empowering individuals and changing public policy related to food.⁶

"A Purpose to Being a Christian"

Accompaniment can have a profound impact for both the accompanist and the one accompanied. Grace Yukich, a sociologist, documents this in her study of the New Sanctuary Movement's earlier work with immigrants in New York City in 2008. One woman, a member of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Brooklyn, testified to a group of immigrant support activists about her newfound faith that resulted from an accompaniment experience. She had been accompanying a Chinese couple to check-ins for several months. Though she had little prior experience with immigrants, she found her faith commitment deepening as she attended church with the couple, met occasionally at a restaurant to check on the couple's situation, and also went with them to periodic check-in meetings with immigration officials. Though never particularly committed to immigrant rights before, she began to experience a newfound sense of faith. "This is the first time I have felt there was a purpose to being a Christian."⁷

1. Katrina Shakarian, "As Trump Pushes Deportations, Volunteers Intensify Immigrant-Accompaniment Program," *Gotham Gazette*, January 8, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y6us4rtf>.

2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "10 Things You Can Do to Accompany Immigrants," May 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ycmyrguv>.

3. Victor Claman and David Butler, *Acting on Your Faith: Congregations Making a Difference* (Boston: Insights, 1994), 21.

4. <https://www.newsanctuarynyc.org/>; <https://justiceforimmigrants.org>

5. <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/>

6. <https://whyhunger.org>, <https://bread.org>

7. Grace Yukich, *One Family under God: Immigration Politics and Progressive Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74.