

First Unitarian Church Of Essex County Works on Immigrant Issues

The First Unitarian Church of Essex County (Orange NJ) has maintained a relationship of several years with immigrant workers and their families. For at least three years, four members of the congregation and two bi-lingual women in a neighboring apartment building have participated in teaching two levels of English as a Second Language. Men and women students come from three nearby towns and seven different countries. Students in the class have participated in lay-led church services concerning immigration and contributed musical selections to the service.

This year, an announcement was made during service about harassment of day laborers and their potential employers by reactionary United Patriots (under the umbrella of the Minutemen) in Dumont NJ. Thirty-five to fifty men gather in a muster zone in adjacent Bergenfield on bitter cold mornings waiting for prospective jobs. Three or four “Patriots” – sporting a van with a giant flag, “Don't Tread On Me” – try to intimidate employers in vans by taunting the drivers and taking photos.

There has been no actual violence as yet. However, the religious education instructor for the church invited the woman who made the announcement to teach two Sunday school classes on the causes and consequences for workers who immigrate. The children were taught:

- land devastated by hybrid crops for export in Latin and South America led to destitution of farmers
- paybacks of US-backed international “loans” led to unemployment
- deadly results of the immigration journey
- exploitation here in "guest" worker programs; confiscation of passports
- dangerous, often murderous, job conditions
- mass raids and deportations, separating children from parents
- evictions from apartments under “no rental to the undocumented”
- how the history of the United States has been a manipulation of who is legal, who is a citizen, who shall be placed in concentration camps, detention centers.

The children were motivated to make their own signs: Our Founding Fathers Were Immigrants; Open Your Eyes, We are All Equal; We Were All Immigrants

The following week, three parents and five children drove to Dumont and spent an hour talking in Spanish, bringing coffee and donuts, and holding up signs to the “patriots” across the street. The parents of one child who weren’t able to come wrote a letter saying how happy she was to have her child participate in this effort.

Another local congregation, St. Mark's Episcopal of Teaneck NJ has also been involved in visiting and bringing food, water, and safety supplies to the workers.