

Conference Minister's Corner

Strangers Welcome Here:

VACANCY signs lit up throughout the conference (part 1 of 2)

Compiled by Amy Zimbelman, Conference Minister



“As Mennonite Christians, We renounce the indifference to and mistreatment of undocumented and documented immigrants that has occurred and continues to occur in our congregations, our communities, and this country. We are committed to joining God’s reconciling mission (Isa. 58:6-9, 2 Cor. 5:16-19) and to live and act as sisters and brothers in Christ to regardless of our legal status.”

—From [MC USA Churchwide Statement on Immigration](#)

Mountain States Mennonite Conference is a leader in standing with immigrants, refugees, and asylees. Folks in our conference work with these populations in many ways and we have helped incubate multiple immigration nonprofits. This month we’ll feature reports from ministries in Colorado Springs, Fort Collins, and Alamosa. Next month we’ll look at what’s going on in Aurora, Albuquerque, and elsewhere in Colorado Springs.

The **Colorado Springs Sanctuary Coalition** was conceived and birthed by Vicki Witte and other concerned community members in 2017 to stand with immigrants who have a legal pathway to fight their deportation orders. “They just need more time in the U.S. to fight their legal case to stay,” says Vicki Witte. Since 2017 dozens of immigrants have taken sanctuary—living solely within the walls of churches—across the US, including three in Colorado Springs. The Coalition is comprised of three churches (First Congregational UCC, All Souls Unitarian Universalists, and Quaker Friends) plus other community members.

In 2019 the Coalition began to ask what they could do for the local undocumented community beyond offering sanctuary. Coalition members asked the simple question: *How can we help?*

“We found that the needs were astronomical,” says Hannah Martin. So, in 2019 the Coalition expanded their mission to include Accompaniment, led by Hannah Martin. They began helping the undocumented community with everything from how to register children for kindergarten to how to use the bus system to how to pay for rent, utilities, and food. The Coalition also changed their name to reflect their expanded mission; they are now ASC COS, **Accompaniment and Sanctuary Coalition Colorado Springs**.

Their clients easily fall through the cracks; out of 2,200 nonprofit organizations in the Springs area, ASC COS is one of only 12 that work with the undocumented population.

ASC COS relies completely on volunteers. A dispatcher connects clients’ requests for services with about 80 volunteers ready to offer support.

“There’s nothing too small and nothing too big we can do for our neighbor,” Hannah says.

For more info, to donate clothes or funds, or to volunteer to walk alongside immigrants to doctor’s appointments, school registration, court hearings, social services appointments, and more, email: csaccompaniment@gmail.com and follow the group on Facebook: [Accompaniment and Sanctuary Coalition Colorado Springs - ASC COS](#).

Sojourn Mennonite of Fort Collins is active in two immigration justice ministries in Fort Collins. In the first ministry, Sojourn created and supports the **Community Dreamer Fund**. The fund serves undocumented, DACA, and asylum-seeking high school and college students in Larimer County. Unlike citizens, these students have no safety net via food stamps, Medicare/health insurance, or unemployment benefits. The

mission of the fund is to help students remain in school until graduation by providing emergency assistance for unexpected expenses.

Students have requested support for rent, food, legal fees, school tuition, medical expenses, vehicle repairs, and computer needs (new or repairs). But even more than that, students say it matters that people outside their families believe in them. The Dreamer Board consists of DACA and undocumented students, community members, and Sojourn representatives. For Sojourn, the Dreamer Fund represents a niche in immigration ministries that is doable for a small faith community.

The Interfaith Solidarity and Accompaniment Coalition of Northern Colorado (ISAAC) is a collaboration of 10 faith communities of various traditions (including Mennonite, Unitarian, Methodist, Jewish, and more) to offer welcome, refuge, healing, and accompaniment with immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who feel threatened in the Fort Collins area. Sojourn Mennonite is one of the founding Coalition members.

One of ISAAC's most notable actions is the creation of the Emergency Immigration Fund, which has distributed over half a million dollars to those in need since the organization began in late 2016. They provide funds for life needs such as Covid-19 relief assistance, unaccompanied minor support, and for covering rent for families after the breadwinner was deported.

ISAAC's work also includes faith-based education and advocacy. They organize large events with nationally recognized speakers, meet with elected officials, and organize groups to write letters to folks in detention. They meet many needs of clients through their faith-based networks, and also refer clients to services throughout the community.

Of his ongoing work with ISAAC, Steve Goering says: "There are people in our community who are good, good people and they are hurting. It's about listening and understanding their lives and collaborating with them, seeking justice, and sharing the blessings that we have. For me, it's about following Jesus."

To donate or volunteer, go to: <https://isaacnoco.org/>

Anabaptist Fellowship of Alamosa is the sponsoring congregation for the Mennonite Voluntary Service unit in Alamosa. Extending back to the 1980's, MVSers and other Mennonites in the San Luis Valley have been closely engaged with immigrant justice concerns, most notably a close partnership with the San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource Center. With only 2-3 long-term staff, a regular flow of full-time MVSers over the years has been an integral part of this small non-profit's capacity to provide a range of services, including immigration legal assistance, adult ESL and citizenship classes, translation, and after-school programming with children living in migrant housing. Beginning in 2016, AFA provided leadership in organizing the SLV Immigrant Rights Coalition, an ecumenical immigrant rights advocacy group, and remains active in coordinating this group. Most recently, the Coalition supported the process of the Alamosa Presbyterian congregation becoming a Sanctuary church (see additional ZING! news piece). In partnership with the Conference's SEED committee, AFA was also able to channel needed funds this past year to the Immigrant Resource Center's Familia Fund, which has provided food boxes, rent and utility assistance, and other needs directly to local immigrant families hit hard by the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.