



Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

brunswick uniting church

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Offering “Sanctuary” at Brunsick UC

Dear friends,

At the Church Council meeting on the 9th of February, we considered the proposal that Brunswick Uniting Church make its buildings available as a potential Sanctuary for asylum seekers currently at risk of immediate removal to Manus Island or Nauru.

After extensive discussion, Council resolved the following by consensus:

Council commits to make itself available to provide Sanctuary, to actively support those who provide Sanctuary, to publicly prosecute the Sanctuary cause and to continue to advocate for compassionate asylum policy.

Council resolves to install a display in the church window to support the Sanctuary movement.

Council notes that this decision refers exclusively to the present case of the proposed return to offshore detention of these 267 asylum seekers. Further potential actions of sanctuary would be subject to a separate decision by Council.

Why do we support the Sanctuary movement?

Council believes the Sanctuary movement is a faithful Christian response to the plight of the 267 asylum seekers. The physical and psychological violence inflicted upon asylum seekers in offshore detention and “camps,” under the policies of the current and previous Australian federal governments, have been well documented. The deliberate exposure of asylum seekers to the known risk of harm, for the purpose of deterring other asylum seekers from coming by boat, is contrary to international law, natural justice and the discipleship of Christ. The churches have been engaged in vigorous advocacy on this issue for many years, but our cry for compassion and justice has been swamped by the politics of fear.

In the circumstances, we understand the Sanctuary movement that has arisen in the churches to be part of the long Christian tradition of peaceful defiance to injustice, and faithful in spirit to the ancient practice of providing sanctuary to the persecuted and oppressed within the church. It is a powerful public witness to the Gospel, which has been heard and echoed in the wider community.

Should we actually offer Sanctuary?

This decision was taken neither lightly nor easily. This decision was informed by a process of consultation with the congregation, in which we heard both a general enthusiasm for the principle and theology of the Sanctuary movement, and a host of practical concerns and questions. We also received one thoughtful letter from a member strongly objecting to the proposal, as he understood it. (Apologies to all those not present on Sunday for the lack of supporting information we provided by email.) We also consulted with the Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre, and specifically considered the needs of asylum seekers within our community.

Council considered the legal status of offering Sanctuary. It is clear that there is no legal protection for anyone claiming “Sanctuary” in modern law. Asylum seekers who could potentially seek Sanctuary (i.e the five families not currently in detention, but at risk of immediate return to Nauru or Manus Island) are being advised by their lawyers of the risks they would be taking if they chose to do so. However, while we are awaiting formal legal advice, we believe that the only charges likely to arise would relate to individual church members’ own non-violent actions to obstruct police or government officials. We noted that Minister Dutton has said that he does not intend to physically remove anyone from Sanctuary. If it did come to that, Council affirms the important distinction between acts of civil disobedience – prayerfully considered and following efforts within the normal channels of democratic dissent – and criminal activity that no Christian should undertake. We note that the Uniting Church empowers its ministers and members to take part in such civil disobedience.

Council therefore felt the harder question was whether to make our church buildings available as a site of immediate Sanctuary itself, or whether to expend our resources supporting and assisting other congregations which did so.

Council considered the capacity of our congregation to meet the physical, psychological, social and medical needs of the asylum seekers, particularly if it became necessary to provide Sanctuary for a significant period of time. We recognise that our property is not obviously well equipped to provide such hospitality. However, we note that in such circumstances we would not be acting alone, but coordinated by the national Sanctuary movement, and supported by the numerous agencies which have committed to it. We note also that we have numerous resources to call upon and that temporary modifications could be made to our facilities to make provision for asylum seekers in our care. We are persuaded that any hospitality that we are able to provide, however meagre, could only compare favourably with the conditions of offshore detention to which they would otherwise be returned.

Council received advice that the allocation of asylum seekers to Sanctuaries would be conducted according to a ‘triage’ system, by which the best-equipped sanctuaries would be the first to receive occupants. We also understand that there are only five families living in the Victorian community who might be in a position to take up Sanctuary. We therefore believe that it is fairly unlikely that we should actually be called upon to provide Sanctuary. However, should such a request come, it would mean that the resources of those better equipped churches had been exhausted, and to decline to provide Sanctuary would be to defer that burden to congregations less well-equipped than our own. We therefore concluded that we should indeed add ourselves to the list of potential Sanctuary sites, and to discuss with the co-ordinating team the practicalities of what we can offer.

What will it mean for us if our offer is taken up?

We make this decision in the awareness that, should we be called upon to provide Sanctuary, it will be neither simple nor comfortable. It may impose upon our congregation material, financial and personal privations that strain our patience and resources. We will need to deal with each situation as it arises, and plan as best we can to ensure that our guests' needs and our own – including children and other vulnerable people – are met.

Nonetheless, we have made this commitment in faithful hope that, with God's help and the assistance of the Church, these challenges shall not prove impossible to overcome.

We ask that you uphold the Church Council and each other in prayer as we now consider the immediate implications of our practical support for the Sanctuary movement, and make whatever preparations we can for the tasks that may be asked of us.

Yours in Christ,

The Brunswick Uniting Church Council

Shawn Whelan (Chair), Daniel Broadstock (Secretary), Ian Ferguson (Minister),
Andrea Alvis, Meredith Budge, Ray Cameron, Mikul Denison, Ann Soo Lawrence,
Kate Scull