

A Refuge for Immigrants in Uncertain Times

Pastor leads movement for social justice

BY CHRISTA MCINTYRE
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Pastor Mark Knutson is a national leader in a movement for social justice for immigrants struggling to obtain legal status in the United States. Northeast Portland's Augustana Lutheran Church, a multicultural congregation where he serves as a spiritual



PHOTO BY CHRISTA MCINTYRE/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The doors of northeast Portland's Augustana Lutheran Church are posted with notices explaining how the church is a sanctuary with no guns, weapons or any use of force allowed.



Pastor Mark Knutson

leader, is one of the few churches to provide sanctuary for immigrants in fear of being deported.

When a Portland resident and immigrant named Francisco Aguirre was being pursued by federal immigration authorities, Knutson and his church reached out to provide him protection.

After 81 days of living in the sanctuary of the church, Aguirre returned home to his wife and two small children. It was one of few cases in the last decade where a church has offered physical sanctuary to a foreign-born person without documents to be in the U.S. or who has stayed beyond the

expiration date of a visa.

"As faith communities we have to always follow what we preach," Knutson said. "Love. Be as gentle as doves, but as wise as serpents. Be ready to confront challenge. Love, without justice, never works. You have to be ready to march, confront and advocate."

Pastor Knutson was on the coast, presiding over a sea burial, when the call came in that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was attempting to deport Aguirre. Without hesitation, he told his staff to take Aguirre in. Aguirre spent the first night sleeping on the red carpeted church altar, a place where Knutson celebrates communion with his congregation and delivers sermons many times on weekends.

ICE is the country's second largest criminal investigative agency, next to the FBI under the Department of Homeland Security. Once an immigrant enters the U.S. without visas or other official channels, they are legally considered criminals. Since the 1970's many Central and South American citizens have fled oppressive and violent governments; not all of them can afford or wait out the long process to enter the United States legally. Some of them must move quickly to avoid being killed by violent factions or drug cartels in their home countries.

Knutson learned firsthand through Aguirre's showdowns in federal court and the battles with local and national media what it

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**"We may have all come on different ships,
but we're in the same boat now."**

- Martin Luther King Jr.

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