

VIGILS
AT
ELIZABETH DETENTION CENTER



A HANDBOOK

Vigils at the Elizabeth Detention Center

Since 2005, on the third Sunday of the month, at 4:00 pm, members of NJ Synod Lutheran congregations gather outside the Elizabeth Detention to pray, sing, tell stories and share personal reflections. They are not permitted to enter the building; they do not see the detainees and the detainees do not see them. Over the years they have been seen by guards and visitors. The inmates know we are there and that they have not been forgotten.

Who are the inmates?

Those detained are a mix of asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants who have entered the U.S. illegally or have overstayed their visas. Asylum seekers must prove to an immigration official at ports of entry that they have “a credible fear” of persecution if they are returned to their home country, in order not to be immediately deported. Some have U.S. families or congregations waiting to provide temporary shelter and assistance, but are kept in detention for months, or even years. U.S. detention standards are based on a correctional model and U.S. law does not provide standards specific to non-criminal asylum seekers. Violations, intentional or unintentional, of immigration laws are not criminal; they are misdemeanors, comparable to driving without a license.

What is a detention center?

The Elizabeth Detention Center (EDC) is a converted warehouse

driveways. It is a good idea to carpool and share cell phones with a rider in each car in case you get separated on the way there.

Compiled by Tom Solomita and Cathy Malmstrom, members of the Immigration Task Force of the New Jersey Synod Justice and Peace Mission Team.

For information about upcoming Vigils or to volunteer to join or organize a vigil at the Elizabeth Detention Center, contact Cathy Malmstrom, email: catnjca@yahoo.com; phone: 908-781-6516

Some hymns that you might want to use taken from the Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) might include:

- 325 – I Want Jesus to Walk with Me
- 546 – To Be Your Presence
- 574 – Here I Am, Lord
- 592 – Jesus As I Am, without One Plea
- 595 – Jesus Loves Me
- 616 – Jesus Remember Me
- 629 – Abide with Me
- 716 - Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace
- 721 – Goodness is Stronger than Evil
- 773 – Precious Lord, Take My Hand
- 777 – Come to Me, All Pilgrims Thirsty

You should plan on being at the EDC for about 30 to 60 minutes.

Getting There

The Elizabeth Detention Center is in a warehouse section of Elizabeth, just south of Newark Airport and not far from exit 13A of the New Jersey Turnpike. You can use your favorite on-line directions website for details. The address is:

Elizabeth Detention Center
625 Evans Street
Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

There is a parking lot for employees and visitors that you can use or you can park on the street. Make sure you do not block any

located in an obscure industrialized area of Elizabeth, NJ, near the airport and shipping docks. EDC is administered by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), under contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Inside walls are painted cinderblock and sections are isolated by means of heavy iron sliding gates that are controlled from a central control room.

The “dorms” are set up for 20 to 40 individuals. Each dorm is the height of the entire warehouse (approximately 4 stories) with windows at the ceiling. Cinderblock walls 3 1/2 -4 feet high separate areas for 1 to 2 beds. A guard stands on duty in each dorm 24/7. In the back of the dorm are showers, sinks and toilets, all completely open except for 3-4 foot high cinderblock walls that provide partial viewing from the hallway and main section of the dorm. In front of each dorm there are round metal tables and stools, all bolted to the floor, where detainees eat and watch TV.

The so-called “outdoor” recreation area is a room in the center of the building with volleyball net and a basketball hoop, walls two stories high and open air skylights. There is less than half of a regulation basketball court. Dorm groups are permitted to use this area for an hour per group per day.

Detainees can volunteer to work in the kitchen, for which they receive \$1 a day which they may use to purchase personal items, stamps and phone cards from a CCA run commissary at inflated prices.

There is no contact between men and women detainees, with the exception of husbands and wives who may visit twice weekly by phone, sitting on opposite sides of a Plexiglas window.¹

There have been several deaths from serious illnesses in this detention and other NJ facilities, due primarily to neglect,

unwillingness of overseers to take inmates' complaints seriously, or no provision of translators to get correct information from inmates.

1. Most of preceding information is from *Yearning to Breathe Free, the Newsletter of First Friends of New Jersey and New York*, vol.10, Issue 2.

By What Authority Do Our Congregations Organize and Participate in Vigils at the Elizabeth Detention Center?

- Old and New Testament Scripture tells us we are to welcome and care for the stranger.

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:34)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." (Matthew 2:13-15).

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come you that are

- New Sanctuary Movement:
http://newsanctuarymovement.org/graphics/documents/ForYouWereOnceAStranger_LowRes.pdf
- Detention Watch Network:
<http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/>
- Grass Roots Leadership:
<http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/>
- Nina Bernstein is an editor for the New York Times and has many articles concerning immigrant issues:
http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/nina_bernstein/index.html?inline=nyt-per

There is also a new book available from Augsburg Fortress entitled, *They are Us*, by Stephen Bouman and Ralston Deffenbaugh (former president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service).

Putting Together a Vigil

The contents of the vigil might contain one or more of a selection of hymns, scripture readings, prayers of intercession, and stories about detainees. The leader should begin with an introduction about detention centers and the conditions that exist for those held captive inside.

Scripture readings may be one of those mentioned earlier or you may choose one that you feel also fits the occasion. Stories about detainees might be the one about Sharon, or you might choose one that a member of your congregation has first-hand knowledge about. There are other stories in the references above. Not too long ago a detainee died at the Elizabeth Detention Center. His story was recorded in the New York Times and may be found at:
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/nyregion/05detain.html?_r=1&scp=3&sq=detention+immigrant&st=nyt&oref=slogin

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) through visits, letters prayer and assistance.

- *to call upon Congress and the administration to immediately end the detention and imprisonment on no-criminal asylum seekers, undocumented laborer and others, in jails or jail-like facilities;*
- *urge the implementation of just, consistent and humane practices regarding the treatment of asylum seekers, such as those suggested in US Commission on International Religious Freedom's February 2005 Study on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal.*

Planning for Your Vigil

As you plan for your vigil, you have an excellent opportunity to educate members of your congregation on the plight of detainees and on the issues immigrants face day to day whether they are documented or undocumented. You can do this in any number of ways: adult discussion groups, youth confirmation classes, bulletin inserts, articles in your church newsletter.

There are many advocacy groups that have information available on the web. A sample of these web sites includes:

- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS):
<http://www.lirs.org/InfoRes/Congregation/AFaithfulResponse.pdf>
- IRATE:
<http://www.irateweb.org/news.htm>

blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, and I was in prison and you visited me.” *Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and have you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just and you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* (Matthew 25:34-40) (See also Leviticus 19:9-10, Deuteronomy 24: 17-21, Isaiah 1:17, Ephesians 2:11-13.

□ **Witness of Detainees - Sharon's Story**

Sharon N. told her story at the New Jersey Council of Churches Issues and Actions meeting in 2006. She was brought from Ghana into the U.S. by her mother when she was six years old. She went through elementary, jr. high and high school in New Jersey and eventually attended Middlesex County College. It was only when she applied for a marriage license that she learned that she was undocumented. She was immediately taken to Middlesex County Jail in handcuffs. There she was harassed by men until she was moved to the women's section where she shared a cell with criminals. She spent 7 days in jail and was then taken to the Elizabeth Detention Center in shackles. She described to us the experience of having to use the toilet and take a shower in full view of other inmates. While in detention she made the acquaintance of African women who had left with their daughters in order to avoid

their genital mutilation. Apparently, because these are not considered “state-inflicted”, that is, governmental, abuses, these detainees were not qualified for asylum and were waiting to be deported.

Sharon was released from EDC pending a hearing on her status. Apparently the court granted her asylum status which was later reversed by ICE, who gave an order of deportation back to Ghana. We have since lost touch with her.

This is just one example of the personal stories that compel us to hold detainees in our prayers and let them know that they haven't been forgotten.

- From Bishop Roy Riley: Excerpts from the Testimony at a Senate Congressional Committee Hearing, June 4, 2008

“ ... Since the detention facility opened in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Lutheran Church members have been providing ministry to immigration detainees through visits on a weekly basis and providing what pastoral care can be provided through a glass partition and over a telephone. On a monthly basis Lutheran hold vigil outside of the Elizabeth facility. The vigils serve the purpose of assuring those who are in detention that they are not alone and that members of the community are concerned about them and praying for them. The vigils also serve as a reminder to those holding vigil that we have brothers and sisters in great need, and to those who are in authority, that the community is watchful ...”

“... In the course of upholding spirits and calming the fears of persons who have been incarcerated - rightly or wrongly - in detention facilities, our visitors have become aware of the very serious lack of appropriate medical care for the detainees. Detainees are sometimes provided medicines and treatments that are inappropriate for their medical needs. Increasingly we hear reports from families that at the time a person is detained, needed medications are taken away and often not returned after the person is processed for detention ... Detainees often wait several days before receiving medical services after having submitted written requests for such care. It is reported that guards frequently told detainees not to bother them with requests.”

- from the Resolution Concerning Just Treatment For Aliens and Asylum Seekers *(adopted at 2005 NJ Synod Assembly)*

“Therefore be it Resolved that the New Jersey Synod memorialize the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly:

- *request our leaders, including the presiding bishop and the synodical bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, pastors, and lay leaders to pray for and advocate for just and compassionate treatment of asylum seekers and all those who are hold in detention;*
- *request that congregations continue to respond in love, spiritual care, and support for those who are detained by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Bureau of*