

It was over a year ago that the congregation of Ponds Reformed Church had discussed and affirmed the welcoming statement that spoke of welcoming and valuing all people. Whereas the discussion was in response to issues of homosexuality within the denomination the congregation spoke about its history of inclusion and desire to be engaged in the work of welcoming all people.

While the discussions focused on LGBT persons, I couldn't help but think of people who might find their way to the doors of the church of whom we had not thought. Who might they be? Would we really follow through on our statement where we claim to "embrace people with a Christ-like love...and commit to learn, educate and advocate until all people experience the justice of God, the peace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit"?

Unbeknown to us a young woman walked by the church and noticed our sign that reads "Open and Affirming." She had only been in the United States for a month and so asked an employee at the library what this meant. She was told it meant that all people are welcomed. That was all she needed to hear. On October 8<sup>th</sup> this young woman came to the office doors asking if she could pray in the sanctuary. The secretary showed her the way. When she left she asked for a Bible. Upon that request, I wanted to meet the person who was asking for a Bible. I met Sandy K.

Sandy is a 25 year old Syrian citizen from Aleppo where her parents and older brother remain. With the ongoing war and increasing violence by ISIS, Sandy's parents knew that as Christians they were a prime target. War had depleted their savings. With their only possession of value remaining, her parent's sold the family car. They had enough to send one of their children to the United States. The decision was to send their daughter, Sandy.

Sandy is here on a student visa having been accepted into the Rutgers' Program for American Language Studies (PALS) in Newark. She was sponsored by her uncle who lives in Wayne. The support promised her never materialized, and the relationship with the uncle became strained. This raised serious concerns for Sandy. On October 21<sup>st</sup> payment for her PALS was due. If payment was not made, Sandy would then not be considered a student. Rutgers is required by law to report to Homeland Security any student changes. Therefore she would be considered an illegal and be deported back to Syria.

Sandy shared her story with consistory (as she had done with the youth group and interested members in October). There were unspent monies in the Foundation Benevolence budget for 2014. Consistory approved using funds to pay for her fall session in order to maintain her student status. A church family opened their home where Sandy lived since mid-October. Another church family designated the monies given in memory of their mother to pay for any expenses incurred by Sandy (textbooks, travel to/from school). Other members helped in a variety of ways with clothing donations, rides, invitations to their home and assistance when needs arose.

While this situation is challenging, it is not new. The church has a history of inclusion sponsoring a refugee family in the 1970s. Above all scripture has directed the response of the church as the words of Jesus from Matthew 25:35 have echoed in the many discussions. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Scripture is replete with instructions to welcome the foreigner and the alien, and

Jesus redefines the meaning of neighbor when he includes a Samaritan in his parable told to a Jewish audience. In December the consistory approved Ponds Reformed Church being Sandy's sponsor and ongoing support. Meanwhile, Sandy has become part of this body of Christ. Her presence has challenged the church to broaden its imagination as to who is our neighbor. And it all began with our discussions concerning LGBT inclusion.