



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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United Church of Christ hosts “Walk in Our Shoes” Latino Simulation

Over 50 citizens of Platteville and several surrounding communities gathered in the basement of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Platteville on Sunday, May 7th to participate in “Walk in Our Shoes”, a two hour simulation meant to provide a glimpse into the everyday life of Latinos in Wisconsin. The program was developed and facilitated by Esther, a faith-based justice group out of the Fox River Valley.

14 members of the First Congregational UCC community served as volunteers, representing different aspects of community life including commerce, health care, criminal justice, and education. The 40 participants hailed from Platteville, Lancaster, Darlington, Dodgeville and as far as Spring Green.

Each participant was assigned a personal profile and asked to complete simple tasks like getting a driver’s license, grocery shopping, or registering their children for school, over the course of four days. Profiles included Latinos of many ages, occupations, and documentation status. In some cases, profiles indicated that the participant could only speak Spanish, prompting volunteers to only communicate with them through nonsensical words or to engage the help of a translator.

“There are so many things I take for granted,” said one participant, Hannah Adams of Platteville, “The simulation was an incredible humanizing experience.” Reflecting on what struck her most, Adams admitted that while she knew transportation could be a challenge for immigrants, “it was a huge area of risk and stress. Trying to accomplish tasks without a driver’s license or a car was impossible. Sometimes you can have mental knowledge, but it took the simulation to really help me understand what that means for someone’s day-to-day experience.”

Following 9/11 many states, including Wisconsin, stopped issuing drivers licenses to undocumented immigrants, a common practice before the 2001 terrorist attacks. A volunteer at the simulation took on the role of a police officer, “pulling over” participants as they traveled

around the makeshift community. Several participants related this stress to the rural Latino communities in Grant County and the lack of public transportation options.

“Our faith teaches that all people are beloved children of God and one of the most consistent commandments throughout scripture is that we are called to love and care for the stranger and immigrants who live among us,” said UCC pastor, the Reverend Zayna Thompson. “Our hope in inviting Esther to lead this simulation is that we might continue to create a more welcoming and compassionate community for all people who call Southwest Wisconsin home.”

The event was organized by Ann Dolan, a member of the congregation and active participant in the Multicultural Outreach Program, a local organization that provides tutoring and other services for Latino families in Grant, Lafayette and Iowa counties. “We wanted to give people a sense of how difficult it can be to navigate the different systems of our communities. Hopefully, through this experience we can gain a better understanding our Latino brothers and sisters.”

Dolan also mentioned that they extended an invitation to area school districts, law enforcements and political representatives to participate in the simulation. “Unfortunately, while a few expressed that they would like to attend but couldn’t due to time constraints, many did not respond at all. We did have a few Platteville High School students and teachers participate,” said Dolan. State Rep. Travis Tranel committed to attending although he did not show up the day of the event.

“I thought the simulation was an amazing opportunity to really begin comprehending the real-life challenges many undocumented people face,” said Adams. The volunteers and participants were treated to coffee and deserts from Los Amigos Mexican market as they spent time processing the experience as a group before heading back out into the community.

First Congregational United Church of Christ is an Open and Affirming congregation that has been rooted in Platteville for 178 years. They claim to be a progressive Christian community dedicated to building a more just and generous world. Further questions can be directed to Pastor Zayna Thompson, contact information above.

Please see photos and captions below.



Participants simulated work hours by playing Jenga with blocks that contained facts about Latino populations in Wisconsin. Here Platteville community member Emma Radosevich puts in a day's work under the watchful eye of volunteer Dick Brewer, a member of First Congregational UCC.



Volunteer, Steve Zoble, pulls over a family for “speeding”.



Participants receive an orientation and instructions from Esther facilitator, Kris Clouthier

