

## **Episode 4: Sanctuary in Amherst**

**SP:** Hi everyone. Welcome to the American Sanctuary Podcast. Today, we sit down with Pastor Vicky Kemper to ask her about her church's involvement in the Sanctuary Movement.

Hello Pasto Kemper, welcome to our podcast episode. My name is Sylvie Palmer, and I'm an Economics and Law, Jurisprudence, and Social Thought double major at Amherst College. My co-host...

**JR:** Hi Pastor Kemper. My name is Jorge. I am majoring in Biochemistry, and I'm also gonna be Sylvie's co-host.

**SP:** We're so excited -

**VK:** It's wonderful to be here. Thank you.

**SP:** Yes, we're so happy to have you on the podcast today. I would love to begin by asking you about your childhood. Would you be able to tell us where you grew up, kind of the memories from childhood that really shaped you, and we'll start there.

**VK:** Well, I grew up in Texas between Houston and Galveston. And my family goes back several generations in Texas. And I guess in terms of sort of the most relevant things here, I grew up in a fundamentalist church and several generations of preachers on my dad's side of the family. And growing up, in some ways I felt like I never really fit in because I always had a concern for justice and a concern for people who were different from me.

You know I grew up middle-class, white, privileged, all of that. But, but again, you know sort of in a very narrow kind of worldview that started to change when I went away to college and went out-of-state and got to meet lots of - I mean, I think it started changing when I was really young because I read a lot. You know looking back, I think there was also a lot of grace in my life that led me in certain directions and in different paths. And then when I went away to college, that really kind of blew my mind in terms of some of the people that I was meeting and things that I was learning.

**SP:** Fascinating. Could you tell us where geographically you went out-of-state to college?

**VK:** Yeah. I did my undergrad work at Northwestern University outside of Chicago in Evanston. And then I did a graduate degree at the University of Michigan.

**JR:** Professor Kemper, we wanted to congratulate you on your success and the church's and Lucio's success in the Sanctuary Movement. That must have been a long and heart-changing, heart-moving three years. But I also wanted to ask about the connection that you mentioned in class. You mentioned that Amherst College was started with the First Church or something along the lines of that. Could you just talk more about how Amherst College is connected to the First Church of Amherst?

**VK:** And you know, back before there was even a town of Amherst, it used to be that in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, before a town could be chartered, there had to be a church there. I mean there was [**SP:** Oh, wow!] Yeah, there was no church-state separation really

So then, and I can't remember exactly when Amherst College was founded, but so we had been around a little while and some of our members and their families, including Emily Dickinson's family, wanted to establish a college in Amherst. And at the time, as you may know, Amherst College was, was kind of like a seminary and it was men only. And so our church and its members, I mean I don't know a lot of details about it, I could find them, but so they gave money and land and actually our first two buildings were on what's now the Amherst College campus.

**SP:** Absolutely. That history is so fascinating. Thank you for explaining that story.

**VK:** Sure! [Over the last] ten to 13 years, we've made more of an effort to be a presence in the town and to host and sponsor interfaith vigils around LGBTQ rights, around anti-racism actions, around gun violence, and things like that. And so some of those have been sort of responses to things happening in the world. And then others have been sort of invitations to people to get involved and participate around certain issues.

You know, it's, as time has gone on, our nation has become much less a Christian nation, and a lot of people have no connections to any kind of religion. Over the last ten, 13 years, we've made more of an effort to, to let people know that. So, for example, were very, very visible in the North Hampton Pride Parade, which unfortunately this is [**SP:** Oh fun!] the second year that we haven't been able to have that and participate in that because of the pandemic. And we're, we participate in the annual block party when that happens and, and other and other things happening in the town. Again, up until the pandemic, I used to do this thing called 'Blessings to Go' on the street corners of Amherst, and we used to do some other things to connect with folks. But what we don't want to be in people's face in terms of sort of the faith aspect of what we do, but we do want to be a resource for people and let them know that we really care about peace and justice for all kinds of people.

**SP:** Absolutely. It sounds like you're working on so many really exciting initiatives to make people feel more comfortable and safe and peaceful and protected.

**JR:** How has the church changed throughout the process of Lucio's sanctuary and his seeking asylum. And what happened to the church after he left?

**VK:** You know, I think in some ways it's been pretty dramatic, and yet if you didn't know our church before sanctuary, you might not realize that. And certainly for as long as I've been there, a lot of our members are very active politically and with social justice causes. We have a soup kitchen in our church. And we're really engaged in a lot of other things.

And I talk about politics a lot in my sermon because Jesus was a very political, right? Not in the way that conservative evangelical churches talk about politics, in encouraging us to be involved in efforts for justice and in movements for justice and peace. And so I would say that before sanctuary, that was just kind of, you know, part of who we are. But we weren't necessarily really engaged with our members of Congress around specific issues. We weren't out in the streets a lot, although that also started to change, especially after Trump was elected because, you know, we felt like, 'wow, this is, you know, the opposite of who we are called to be as a church and what we want our country to be.'

When we took Lucio into sanctuary, we had a key partner in that, which is the Workers, the Pioneer Valley Workers Center. And, and of course they are in your face political right, in the best way. And so at times, there was a little tension and we kinda had to figure out how to walk a fine line between some solidarity work that was very political, remembering that we were most fundamentally a community of faith as opposed to a political organization. So again, that was, that sometimes felt like a fine line, and at different times, different members of the church might feel like we were on the wrong side of it. But so it got us much more engaged in the nuts and bolts of political activism than we had been as a church before.

**SP:** Absolutely. And how do you balance that internally, making sure that you keep faith at the center of what you're doing as a pastor, but also, you know, of course some issues, exactly like you said, some things just are inherently political. How did you find that balance within yourself?

**VK:** Well for me, it's primarily about staying spiritually grounded, remembering that, you know, whatever position, values I have, whatever I speak out on, that's coming primarily out of my faith. It's not coming out of a political party. It's not coming out of a political group. It's really coming out of my sense of what God cares about, who Jesus was, and who we are called to be as a church. You know, some of our values and some of our positions and the things we get involved with may end up looking like, may end up having a lot in common with sort of the

progressive wing of the Democratic Party or Democratic Socialist or something like that, but that's, that's not the reason for it. The reason for it is the Gospel. You know, Jesus was pretty clear about taking care of the poor and working for, not in a way that's primarily about charity, but in working for justice and empowerment of the people who've been left out and left behind and looked down upon and discriminated upon for one reason or another. That those are really supposed to be the people that we care most about, and the people that we're working for.

**SP:** We'd love to learn more about how you led the church through transition periods or even with your community peer-to-peer, friend-to-friend as you were transitioning from entirely faith-based to of course a church but also taking some stances that end up being very political just by nature of our society, going in that transition and then when Lucio moved out of sanctuary.

**VK:** I'll try to give you a couple of specific examples. And at the same time, I want to be careful here because even when we made a decision not to do something or not to allow something to happen, it wasn't because we disagreed or that we didn't think that was right. It was just, we had to be clear about our role as a church and our identity as a church.

So for example, early on there were a few times when the Workers Center and people associated with them wanted to come basically have a rally or a protest action on our front lawn. Or when we were doing events, sanctuary events in the building, wanted to get really vocal. And, and so I felt like I was a little bit in the middle between the Workers Center folks and some church members in terms of sort of figuring out what we could do and what we could allow happen and what we couldn't do.

So, for example, we didn't want to have on our church property a bunch of people standing and yelling with signs and yelling 'F you' to Trump or whomever else, right? Because for a lot of reasons, one of them being that also part of our sense of what it means to follow Jesus and be the church is to be nonviolent. And that's not only not using weapons or not going to war, but also not being violent in word or action. And so it didn't necessarily mean that we didn't share those feelings, but again we didn't want our church to sort of be the staging ground for some really vehement, angry, obscene political statements. And we felt like there were other places where that could happen, so it didn't need to happen on our property or in our sanctuary.

**JR:** Speaking of transition periods, could you paint the scene at the church when the pandemic hit? What did the church look like? Was there like a sense of urgency in the air of any - just describe the church's transition from or into the pandemic.

**VK:** Well, I think like a lot of folks, when we first began that transition, we thought it was going to be very temporary, right? And so the last time we had a Sunday morning worship service there

was March 8th of 2020.

**SP:** Oh my goodness! Wow.

**VK:** Yeah. So then, yeah, things started getting bad, things started getting locked down. So for March 15th, we just emailed people kind of a do-it-yourself worship order, thinking, ‘you know, we’ll be back again in a week or two.’ And then it became really clear that maybe it was gonna be longer than that, so on March 22nd, we began live streaming on YouTube. And in the week, I guess it was the week sometime between the 15th and the 22nd or around there that we really shut down our building.

And which was a very big deal because, again, we have a soup kitchen. We had a Spanish-speaking church that met in our building three times a week. We had lots of 12-Step groups that met in our building. Not to mention, choir rehearsal and sanctuary, so, and accompaniment and all of that. So it was a very dramatic shift and not easy on anyone. And as we tried to figure out what we could do and couldn’t do and, and essentially, you know, our building has been closed. So it was a dramatic change.

So the first dramatic transition was that when sanctuary began, when Lucio came in, our building that had always been opened, we locked the doors, right? And we would only let in people who had something – had a meeting in the building, the soup kitchen folks, the church folks, the 12-Step folks. And then when we transitioned and into sanctuary, went from being ‘okay, our doors are locked, but still there’s tons of stuff going on and people coming in and out’ to ‘the doors are locked and everybody basically needs to stay out.’

**SP:** How do you envision the future of sanctuary at the church looking? I’m wondering if that’s something that, a conversation that’s been happening or if you personally have a vision that you would love to see actualized?

**VK:** One is that, we’re continuing to walk with Lucio and his family because, you know, he’s still got a lot of legal issues to work through, and so I continue to meet, right now primarily by phone and Zoom with his lawyer and with Margaret Sawyer from the Workers Center as we sort of strategize about how to help him. He, we did get work permission for him. There was a US Supreme Court case that came down, a decision that came down a couple of weeks ago that we hope will be helpful to him, and we continue to connect with him and his family around transportation and birthdays and graduations and things like that.

**SP:** I was wondering if you see the church maybe taking in another person seeking sanctuary in the future, or does that maybe not seem feasible or not like the best option given present

circumstances?

**VK:** You know, I think we would have a big discussion about that. I can tell you that, so when Lucio came in, as I think I told the class, we don't have a shower in our building. And so [**SP:** Oh, right!] we ordered online this portable shower that as these walls and then it has a hose that you connect to like a sink, a bathroom sink. And then you put it over a drain and it drains out either back into the sink or into a toilet or something. I can't remember. So just today, we've had e-mails about what to do with the shower, and we've decided to hang onto it for now.

**JR:** My mother is a Guatemalan immigrant with a very close connection to the scripture, and I wanted to know what scripture did you rely on during the very difficult days with Lucio in sanctuary?

**VK:** You know, I'm trying to guess what Lucio would say to that, and I'm not sure, but we relied a lot on prayer and the power of prayer. Obviously, there are several verses in the, in what people call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, about welcoming the stranger because you were strangers. There's a very powerful passage in, I think it's Isaiah 43, I could be wrong, but I think it's Isaiah 43 that talks about 'be not afraid. When you walk through the waters, I will be with you when you walk through the fire, you will not get burned.' That's something that I think Lucio leaned on, that a lot of us lean on, leaned on because there were a lot of really down times where the future was very unclear and it looked like we were kind of at the end of the road. And so we just kind of had to keep trusting that something good was going to come of this.

Lucio, I can tell you, is a serious student of the Bible and read his Bible every day. And at one time talked about prayer as the key that unlocks the door. And I thought that was a very strong, powerful image for one of the ways we were walking in faith together with him.

**SP:** What a powerful end, thank you so much for that answer. It was beautiful.

**JR:** Thank you so much Pastor Kemper.

**VK:** Thank you all. I really appreciate your interest.

**SP:** We hope you enjoyed our conversation. Thank you for listening.