

## **“God Is in This”**

Can finding a parking place right in front of your destination – at night, in the rain, in downtown Philadelphia – be considered proof of God’s existence?

No? Well, how about finding two parking places on such a night, sitting next to each other and just long enough for a 12-person van carrying African asylum-seekers from Albuquerque to the House of Grace refuge?

“We never even think about parking out there,” the woman who manages the House of Grace told us. “You’ll never find a space again.” And during the three days we spent settling the Angolan family into the old red-brick rowhouse, we never did.

The journey to the House of Grace included many small miracles.

The arrival of the family at Albuquerque’s St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church about a year earlier, for instance, had turned out to be a gift to the parish. St. Michael’s had been struggling with the idea of offering sanctuary to immigrants, without being able to reach consensus. Faced with a family in need, opposition vanished. The stranger was at our door. We took them in.

St. Michael’s united in love for these people, who had fled beatings and death threats in Angola only to discover that they were unwelcome in Cuba and Central America. They bravely made their way across Mexico, and presented themselves at the U.S. border to request asylum. The father was immediately imprisoned, and the mother and two young children were left on the streets of El Paso.

Their first hint of kindness came when the mother and children found refuge at Annunciation House in El Paso. After several weeks there, they were permitted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to be transferred to St. Michael’s in Albuquerque. As a condition of her supervised release, the mother wore an ankle monitor at all times. Parishioners who had opposed offering sanctuary to undocumented immigrants were reassured to know that St. Michael’s was not breaking any laws by housing the family.

The presence of the mother and children energized St. Michael’s. For almost a year, parishioners drove the children to school, took the mother grocery shopping and worked to free the father from immigration detention in El Paso. On weeknights, the children roller-skated in the church parking lot. On Sunday mornings, the family attended the 9 o’clock service. Every evening, delicious cooking smells came down the hall from the rector’s study and conference room, which had been converted into an apartment.

After months in detention, the father was released on parole and allowed to come live at St. Michael's with his family. Even though a team of parishioners had worked valiantly with a law firm in El Paso to try and free the father, it was a nationwide ACLU lawsuit that finally achieved his release. The church then helped them move to Philadelphia, where asylum requests have a better chance of success in court.

Throughout the journey, the family and the parish prayed together. "God is in this," we prayed – at first in hope, and then bit by bit, in thanks.