Introduction

Boston has always been a city of immigrants. Some, like the English Puritans who founded the city in 1630, came seeking economic opportunity and freedom to practice their religion as they saw fit. European slave traders brought others by force, including thousands of Africans in the 17th and 18th centuries. Still others came fleeing famine, war, and political turmoil in their homelands, from Irish Catholics and Eastern European Jews in the 19th century to Central American and South Asian immigrants in the 20th century. Each new group has brought its own distinctive culture, including religious beliefs and practices. And with each new group, the larger Boston community has had to reckon with its own assumptions about who we are as a city.

Despite its immigrant history, Boston has not always been hospitable to newcomers. Rather than seeing the shared experience of being immigrants as something that links different communities over time, more established immigrant groups often resisted making space for new arrivals. In many cases religious identity fueled tensions between established groups and newer arrivals. Nativist Protestants burned the Irish-Catholic Ursuline convent in Charlestown in 1834, and a group of young Harvard educated Boston Brahmins, anxious about their diminishing power at the end of the 19th century, established the Immigration Restriction League, which successfully lobbied for the restrictive Federal Immigration Act of 1917. Well into the 20th century Boston was a hot bed of anti-Semitism, much of it stoked by the fiery radio tirades of Father Charles E. Coughlin, who found one of his single largest audiences among Boston’s Irish Catholics. In the 1980s, white blue-collar workers carried out a series of violent attacks on Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants, including an arson attack on a Cambodian tenement building in Revere.

Adding to these complex dynamics is Boston’s long history of racism. The city may have been home to leading abolitionists at one time, but racial violence and discrimination against African-Americans has been a continuous thread in the city’s history. In the early 20th century, the city’s black population increased dramatically as the Great Migration brought thousands of African-Americans from the American South to northern industrial areas, including Boston. They were joined by other immigrants from Cape Verde and the Caribbean. These black communities faced significant discrimination in housing, education, and social services, leading to protests during the Civil Rights Movement that included a three-day riot in Roxbury in 1967. Another moment of crisis was the busing controversy of 1974, in which students were bused to neighborhoods across the city to facilitate desegregation, drawing fierce criticism as well as acts of racial violence. Despite these and other efforts, Boston’s legacy of institutional racism persists, and the city’s struggles for racial equity shape the experiences of immigrant communities.

In recent decades, Boston has worked to take a more constructive approach to immigration. Numerous cities in the greater Boston area now actively dedicate themselves to working to foster a welcoming attitude toward new immigrants that strives to appreciate and integrate the strengths immigrant groups bring while supporting and protecting the most vulnerable among them. Local governments in Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and Lawrence, among others have passed symbolic resolutions and executed policies and programs intended to support safe and vibrant immigrant communities. Much of this work is the result of active organizing on the part of relatively recent immigrant communities themselves to make their needs heard and transform their city governments into active allies. It is also the work of cooperation between religious congregations, voluntary organizations, and city governments. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is a Wilson Fish state, meaning that
rather than instead of administering refugee resettlement programs itself, the state provides funding for voluntary resettlement agencies and service providers. This means that in Massachusetts, immigrants and refugees receive medical assistance, social services, job training, and other support from nongovernmental organizations, many of which are faith-based.

Welcoming Communities
In order to work effectively with a diverse group of immigrant communities, both state and city governments maintain relationships with a variety of secular and faith-based organizations as well as with religious communities that often serve as the hub for recent groups of immigrants. Some of these relationships are contractual, such as when the government contracts with non-governmental organizations to provide resettlement and support services under Wilson Fish. Other relationships are collaborative, such as when government employees work with individual congregations to educate people about their legal rights and the best ways to access necessary services. Cambridge’s Mayor Denise Simmons formed an advisory council of religious leaders in the area. In Boston, the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services employs liaisons for each neighborhood in the city, as well as specific immigrant communities, who maintain working relationships with local congregations, religious leaders, and community organizations.

Recently, in response to many immigrants’ rising fears of persecution and deportation, the City of Boston has engaged in numerous efforts to reassure Boston’s immigrant communities that the city will stand by them. Alongside explicit proclamations of support, these efforts include both cultural projects intended to build bonds across communities to cultivate a healthy city culture and city policies intended to promote safety and provide legal aid for the most vulnerable. The Mayor’s Office for Immigrant Advancement has spearheaded a number of the cultural projects including an urban mural project featuring local immigrants from “then” and “now” and a postcard project designed to foster individual connections by providing welcoming postcards for people to send to recent immigrants. They feature phrases like “My story is your story!” and “We’re all immigrants,” underscoring the central message of these campaigns. That solidarity has also been expressed by Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh who famously, in the wake of Donald Trump’s inauguration, in January of 2017 offered to shelter undocumented immigrants in his office at City Hall. More practically, in September of 2017 Mayor Walsh announced the Greater Boston Area Immigrant Defense Fund, which will provide local immigrants with legal support and education. Efforts such as the Immigrant Defense Fund are in line with Mayor Walsh’s general promise to make immigrant communities a priority when he took office in 2014.

On a legislative level, local governments in the Boston area have stood by immigrant communities by signing the Transparency and Responsibility Using State Tools (TRUST) Act. The TRUST Act movement is not in itself a sanctuary movement. Rather, TRUST Acts limit the extent to which local police cooperate with requests from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to detain individuals after they have posted bail while ICE investigates whether to deport them. Under TRUST Acts, local police only detain individuals if they have a criminal warrant or the individual poses an immediate threat to the community. The goal of TRUST Acts is to make all immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, feel safe and to encourage their cooperation with local law enforcement on other matters. In the greater Boston area, Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, and Lawrence have all passed TRUST Acts.

In contrast, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has had more mixed responses to immigrants’ fears of an increasingly aggressive ICE. In July 2017, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled that local police cannot detain an
individual on immigration grounds alone. Shortly thereafter, both Governor Charlie Baker and Republican state lawmakers filed bills expanding the extent to which local police are directed to cooperate with ICE. At the same time, another bill similar to TRUST Acts, the Safe Communities Act, is currently pending before the legislature. These mixed attitudes at the state level, in addition to the federal government’s current hostility toward immigrants and refugees, mean that it is largely up to the cities to decide how best to ally with local immigrant communities.

Sanctuary
Some cities in the greater Boston area have designated themselves as sanctuary cities, including Cambridge and Somerville. Both cities first identified as sanctuary cities in the 1980s in order to show solidarity with refugees from El Salvador, and both have recently reaffirmed their commitment to protecting undocumented immigrants in response to increasingly aggressive federal immigration enforcement. Somerville’s Mayor Joseph Curtatone has been a fierce advocate of sanctuary policies in his city, despite federal threats to cut funding. “If cities have to take a stand for basic human decency,” he said at a press conference in January 2017, “let me be clear that we’re going to make that stand...This is the time when we need to leverage American values around human decency.”

The very idea of sanctuary cities grew out of the work of religious congregations and activists in the 1980s. These activists were fighting to bring attention to political problems in the Central America, problems they saw as stemming from American policy and intervention. Then and now, “sanctuary” has been a contested term. Politically, it tends to be used to mean noncooperation with ICE. Religious communities sometimes use it that way, but they also use it to indicate the practice of offering houses of worship as shelter to immigrants facing deportation. Moreover, opponents of both kinds of sanctuary offer their own interpretation of the term, often drawing on its usage in the Hebrew Bible in their arguments in favor of the rule of law.

Despite the contested nature of the term, many religious groups have adapted the idea and practice of sanctuary to meet the needs of undocumented immigrants threatened by current federal policies. While some religious groups and individuals decline to participate or actively oppose the movement, other congregations in the Boston area have formed coalitions to offer sanctuary and other support to undocumented immigrants at immediate risk of deportation. University Lutheran Church in Harvard Square currently hosts a mother and her two daughters in sanctuary, with support from the eight other congregations in the Cambridge Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition and Harvard’s SLIC Refuge Community. Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain is also hosting an undocumented man from El Salvador, in what is believed to be the first instance of an African-American church providing sanctuary. He is supported by a coalition of three Christian and three Jewish congregations. Both Jewish leaders and African-American leaders involved with the case stated that the man’s story resonated with them because of their own communities’ histories of being treated as “the Other” and persecuted for it.

Sanctuary in the Streets, a project based out of First Congregational Church in Milton, does not offer physical sanctuary, but provides material and legal support to immigrants in need and live-streams ICE raids to raise public awareness of the issue.
Religious Literacy

The different responses of local governments and religious communities in the Boston area raise important questions about religious literacy in the context of immigration policies and best practices.

1. Given the role of religious leaders as conduits to their congregations, what do local government officials need to know about religion in order to effectively reach and mobilize immigrant communities?

2. The very term “sanctuary” which has become a cultural flashpoint in the Trump era, is itself born of religious roots. Given those religious connotations, what happens when that term moves from religious discourse into the realm of public policy? How does that shift the meaning of “sanctuary” and shape its political and legal implications?

3. The sanctuary movement has historically been led primarily by white mainline Protestant congregations with significant financial resources, political clout, and cultural capital. At the current moment, the intersection of the sanctuary movement with the Movement for Black Lives has caused many of these congregations to grapple with fundamental questions about white supremacy in their own religious traditions and congregations. How can religious literacy enable a constructive conversation about these interlocking issues, as opposed to simplistic narratives that demonize one, both, or all sides?

4. Local governments in Boston, like local governments across the United States, delegate much of the work of welcoming and acculturating new immigrants to faith-based organizations such as Catholic Charities and Jewish Vocational Services. In addition to raising questions about the tangled relationship of church and state, this arrangement also raises deeper questions about the role of government itself in our society. What is local government’s obligation to newcomers? Who do we believe should be ultimately responsible for creating a welcoming community? How do we come to hold those beliefs and how do they shape policy and public opinion?

Additional Reading | Greater Boston Area

Silvia Dominguez, “Race Relations and Immigration in Boston,” ASA Footnotes, July-August 2008
“Understanding Trust Acts, Community Policing, and ‘Sanctuary Cities,’” American Immigration Council, October 10, 2015
Nicole Fleming, “Somerville Celebrates Thirty Years as a Sanctuary City,” Boston Globe, February 4, 2017
Claire Parker, “Baker Proposes Bill to Tighten Immigration Enforcement,” Boston Globe, August 1, 2017
Natasha Mascarenhas, “City Announces Immigrant Defense Fund,” Boston Globe, September 13, 2017
Laura Crimaldi, “During Illegal Immigration Crackdown, Campaigns Celebrating Immigrants Gain Steam,” Boston Globe, October 21, 2017