

## Light Up the Night for IRIS - and for Connecticut

In the congregation I serve (The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme), I've been sharing since the November election that we are in a position similar to that of the biblical character Miriam in the second chapter of Exodus. Faced with a terrible catastrophe (a threat against all Hebrew male children, including her baby brother, soon to be named Moses), Miriam "watches from a distance" as a small basket carrying her brother bobs up and down along the Nile River. Since November, we too have been forced to watch and to wait in the bulrushes with Miriam, as if from a distance, using the time to gain perspective and to gather our wits as the current of history swirls around us. In the Exodus story, Miriam watched and waited for the opportune moment to act, and when it arrived, she seized it.

People of faith and conscience will need to be continually vigilant in this new political environment. We'll need to seize opportune moments whenever we can to stand with the most vulnerable around us.

Now is the first of those moments. Now is the time to emerge from the bulrushes, as Miriam eventually did.

In these early days of the new administration, federal funding for a host of worthy agencies has been suspended, eliminated, and then, (maybe?) partially reinstated. Few who depend upon that funding believe that the threat has gone away. Meanwhile, livelihoods and support services throughout the country hang in the balance.

Among the many worthy agencies affected across Connecticut, IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigration Services) in New Haven has experienced tremendous whiplash. Depending on which order is being considered, and when, it appears that IRIS stands to lose millions of dollars in funding, preventing them not only from helping to resettle refugees, but also hindering their ability to assist people in need all across the state. Losing that funding would place thousands of people in jeopardy.

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, together with two other churches in town (St. Ann's and Christ the King) as well as many other residents of no particular faith, have partnered with IRIS for the past decade, ever since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. Indeed, our community was the first in the state to reach out to IRIS during that crisis, though many others soon did the same. Before long, a Syrian family arrived in Old Lyme and has remained here ever since, just the way Syrians arrived in communities all across Connecticut. Since that time, we have helped resettle five additional families in our area from many different parts of the world, a pattern that has unfolded all up and down the Connecticut Shoreline, and throughout the entirety of the state.

IRIS is one of the crown jewels of Connecticut, helping to make us the welcoming, hospitable, and culturally rich state that we are. Our communities have been improved by welcoming refugees, and supporting immigrants, which IRIS has facilitated.

If this is an opening salvo from a hostile new administration, then the time is right for Connecticut residents who continue to believe in the sanctity of hospitality to come together, and to push back the night.

With that in mind, the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme invites friends and supporters of IRIS to join us for a candlelight vigil on Wednesday evening, February 5th, at 6:00 PM. We'll sing, we'll offer

words of prayer, and we'll light up the night. But we also have a goal: to raise \$100,000 as a gesture of goodwill and support for IRIS. That won't be enough. But if similar events took place around the state, it would go a long way.

IRIS has given our communities so much. They have offered support and protection to so many, and they have enriched our lives for the relationships they helped to create. It's time to give a little back.

But more to the point, it's now time, like Miriam, to emerge from the bulrushes, and to push back against the Pharaohs that continue to afflict the vulnerable.

It's time to show who we are as residents of a diverse and welcoming state, one that we can all be proud to live in.

Rev. Steven R. Jungkeit, Ph.D.  
Senior Minister  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

All are welcome to attend the vigil on Wednesday evening. The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme can be found at 2 Ferry Rd., Old Lyme, CT 06371.