What a difference a year makes! Last year at this meeting, the prospect of state-level policy action related to immigration seemed possible but unlikely, something for which we should always be ready. Instead, though, we discussed how to work more at a local government level for humane and compassionate policies and practices. At the October plenary meeting our task force added another idea, to develop a program of better informing UUs in New Jersey about immigration issues. And then, the election of 2016 took place.

Before we dwell on the post-election change, though, we should make a point about our continued readiness to get involved in New Jersey legislative work. Last October, a bill that would give driving privileges to undocumented persons was being considered in the Legislature, and our task force was there. Executive Director Rob Gregson spoke at a rally outside the State House, and two of us met with an assemblyperson to urge his support for the bill. Our roads will be safer and immigrants will not be forced into illegal actions if they are eligible for licensing. We stand ready at any time to do this kind of work.

Since the election, and even more since the inauguration of the Trump Administration, our task force has concentrated on ways to resist the harsh enforcement of immigration laws, with a growing number of deportations and a threatened weakening of protections provided by DACA (i.e., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) for the Dreamers (undocumented youth who came to the US with their parents). We have talked and learned much about Sanctuary Cities, or “Fair and Welcoming Cities,” about supporting congregations that agree to house persons in sanctuary, and about having some of our own congregations be available to house persons who would otherwise be deported immediately. We have talked and learned more about establishing relationships with immigrant advocacy groups and with community groups of immigrants.

The task force is getting ready to share with UU congregations around the state a number of ideas and explanations that we hope will be helpful, as so many persons of faith try to understand a very complex issue and determine how to respond in a way that is consistent with their values. We are preparing explanatory pieces about immigration and enforcement. And we want to help UUs understand what is happening now to undocumented persons who are around them: their sense of a growing loss of protection and a greater fear.

UU congregations can have a role in helping these people. Our task force is preparing a resolution that could encourage every congregation in the state to agree to become active in fair and welcoming practices in our communities, including supporting policies and programs aimed at helping persons who are now vulnerable. We anticipate being ready to present some of these ideas to our congregations soon.