

Congregations support imprisoned Somalis

In 2016 Abdirahman Daud was sentenced to prison for 30 years after he and several of his friends were convicted of plotting to leave the United States to join ISIS fighters in Syria. The men were arrested in San Diego in April 2015 before they had a chance to leave the country.

For the Somali community in Daud's hometown of Minneapolis, the case is controversial. Many argue that the boys were entrapped by an FBI informant posing as jihadist.

"I just blindly followed everything that was told to me," Daud said at his sentencing. Daud's fiancé, Naema Ahmed, said he was only trying to escape FBI scrutiny. "We were all aware that he was being watched," she said. Many Somalis question the length of the sentences imposed, since the men weren't charged with actually harming anyone.

Were the young men just expressing youthful bravado or did they plot against the United States? Were they victims of entrapment or willful conspirators?

Beth Minehart couldn't sort out the complexities of the case, but when her congregation, Minnehaha United Methodist in Minneapolis, formed a support group for the families of the imprisoned, she joined in.

"Even when I just read it in the paper when it was happening, I thought, 'They're kids. They are so young. How can you put away children for so long?'"

Daud's family is determined to pay for his education while he is in prison, and the Minnehaha congregation is helping to cover those expenses and to keep the young men connected to their families, as phone calls and email cost money in prison. Daud, 23, is studying engineering through Ohio University's prison program.

"I can't help but identify with the

mother," said Minehart, who has a 26-year-old son and helped raise a nephew who is the same age as Daud. "We're not about figuring out whether they are guilty or innocent. I don't want them having to justify themselves again and again."

St. Mary's Episcopal Church in St. Paul has also gotten involved in the case through the advocacy of one of its members, Matthew Palombo. A professor at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, Palombo is a longtime adviser to the school's large Muslim Student Association. Though he did not personally know the young men leading up to the criminal case, he attended their trial and has become one of their leading advocates. Guled Omar was convicted as ringleader and sentenced to 35 years in prison in November 2016. Around that time, Palombo learned that Omar's family was facing a crisis.

Omar's older sister, who asked for her

name to be kept private, was pregnant with her second child. The wages from her job had been paying the rent for the two-bedroom apartment housing her mother and her seven younger siblings. If she took a maternity leave, her family would not be able to pay rent, and Guled was no longer there to help.

When the priest at St. Mary's, LeeAnne Watkins, learned of this situation, she called on clergy friends to cover the rent. Palombo's wife, Leah, hosted a baby shower at the church. Watkins has become another advocate for the families, especially the Omars.

"Whether you believe [Guled Omar] did it or he didn't do it, none of us is beyond redemption," Watkins said. "When Jesus told us to visit people in prison, he didn't ask us to check innocence or guilt first."

People of the two congregations, along with St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, have contributed more than \$15,000



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEAH PALOMBO

CARING FOR A PRISONER'S FAMILY: Members and friends at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, held a baby shower for Guled Omar's sister (whose name is withheld at her request for privacy reasons) in November 2016, just as he was being sentenced to 35 years in federal prison for his part in an alleged terror conspiracy.

worth of support to the Somali men and their families. Watkins, her colleagues, and other donors have helped to pay the Omars' rent over the past year and a half. The churches' goal is to see that all of the men have access to education, even providing a scholarship for Omar's younger brother to attend MCTC. Individuals are sponsoring Guled Omar's education through Ohio University, and he in turn corresponds with them through a quarterly newsletter. "I refuse to give up and allow myself to go down the path of hatred and anger," he wrote in the first letter.

The congregations' connection to the Somali families has not been without controversy. Some people question why the churches are giving their attention to the Somalis when there are so many other people in prison and in need.

"Some people in the church just don't want to see the church in the press," Minehart said.

At St. Mary's, the conflict has at times been pointed. Watkins was criticized for inviting Palombo to speak from the pulpit, where he challenged whether the convictions were just. A juror in the criminal case who heard about Palombo's advocacy told him that Guled Omar would sooner blow up the church than accept help from it.

Watkins likens the Somali refugees to the biblical figure of Zacchaeus, the ostracized tax collector. "The two cultures that I think are the edgiest to align ourselves with now are Muslims and immigrants," she said.

Abdirahman Daud's aunt and fiancé spoke of how important he was in the neighborhood.

"Abdirahman would tutor all the kids," Naema Ahmed said. "His character speaks to everybody."

Ahmed believes that Daud did the right thing in pleading not guilty and refusing to testify against his friends. "I am glad that he did not lose his sanity. I'm glad that he did not trade his dignity for freedom. If he's spiritually free, if he's mentally free, that's better for him and for us than if he were mentally incarcerated. They can still do a lot of good in the world from behind those bars." —Jesse James DeConto for CHRISTIAN CENTURY

Israel plans to bar supporters of BDS from entering country

Israel plans to block entry for members of Jewish Voice for Peace and the American Friends Service Committee, among other groups that are part of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

The campaign for Palestinian rights calls for an international boycott of Israeli companies and academic and cultural institutions.

In mid-January, Israel declared that members of 20 organizations in the BDS movement will be barred entry from the country as of March 1 for security reasons.

The move immediately drew fire, including from the targeted organizations themselves and their supporters, who said it was only further evidence of Israel's repression. Opposition to the action also was voiced by some in Israel and abroad who don't support BDS. They consider it to be not only counterproductive but corrosive to the country's democratic ideals.

"BDS is not an existential threat to Israel unless Israel acts in a way to make it one," said Jonathan Rynhold, a professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University outside Tel Aviv. "It is damaging Israel's reputation abroad."

Israel's action was made possible by an amendment to the March 2017 Law of Entry, which made it legal to block the leaders of BDS organizations from entering Israel.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel said the law "violates the most basic tenets of democracy by making political opinions a consideration that may prevent non-citizens from entering Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territory."

Sharon Abraham-Weiss, executive director of ACRI, the country's version of the ACLU, said the law and now the plans for blocked entry reflect a growing intolerance for criticism on the part of Israel's government.

"We are concerned that the space for freedom of speech, which is a pillar of democracy, is shrinking," she said. "In a democratic country you want to hear

various positions. And to limit criticism does not allow this kind of fundamental discourse." —Dina Kraft, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Rabbis offer sanctuary to Africans in Israel

A prominent rabbi in Israel has asked her peers to provide sanctuary for nearly 40,000 African asylum seekers who could soon be deported by the government.

Rabbi Susan Silverman, the older sister of comedian Sarah Silverman, is a Jerusalem-based community activist who was once taken into police custody for demanding that women be allowed to read from a Torah at the Western Wall.

In December, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the government will deport all African asylum seekers by the end of March if they do not accept the government's offer of \$3,500 and a ticket out of the country. Most come from Eritrea and Sudan and entered Israel illegally via Egypt.

Advocates for the asylum seekers, whom Netanyahu calls "infiltrators," say their lives will be in danger if they are forced to leave Israel. Netanyahu has said that Israel, as a sovereign country, has a right and obligation to protect itself against illegal immigration.

Silverman unveiled her plan January 16 during a conference organized by the Israeli group Rabbis for Human Rights. Called the Anne Frank Home Sanctuary movement, the plan asks the organization's nearly 200 members to house asylum seekers if the government follows through on deportation.

The family of Frank, the teenage diarist, was sheltered by Christians before being deported to a Nazi concentration camp, where all but Anne's father died.

"This isn't a new idea; it's something people have done for a long time and that Jews in dangerous places have benefited from—now it's our turn," Silverman said. "Now we have our own state, and we have power and the ability to protect the stranger, as the Torah commands us 36 times."