

Reviving the Sanctuary Movement

Churches can be on the frontlines of resistance.

December 29, 2016



SALVADOREAN REFUGEES, from left: Ronald Sauza, Luis Rivas, Father Jesus Nieto and Jose Escobar. All but Nieto seek asylum.

Churches offer sanctuary to Salvadorean refugees

National Catholic Reporter.

Note: This is the first post in the Reviving Sanctuary series in which Erin Guzmán explores the Sanctuary Movement and its implications for today.

As we enter the Trump era, individuals and institutions across the country are making preparations for what may come, namely: mass deportations, a Muslim registry, increased surveillance, and various forms of violence that will hurt people of color, women, those suffering from poverty and homelessness, the LGBTQI community, and people with disabilities.

The fear is real and the stakes are high. I am not interested in debating the extent to which proposed policies will actually take effect or hold power. What's important now is answering questions about *how* we will collectively respond to the injustices we might see and experience in the coming weeks, months, and perhaps years. Some are already doing so by reviving traditions and movements of resistance. The Sanctuary Movement is such a tradition embodied in a practical tactic that religious communities can tap into today.

Claiming Sanctuary

While it might seem like an ambiguous term, Sanctuary as a practice of solidarity has a deep past with theologically robust roots. The Torah is filled with examples of providing hospitality for “the stranger” and society’s most vulnerable. God repeatedly reminds the Israelites that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt and therefore should not harm the “foreigners” seeking shelter or refuge in their communities (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:33; Deut. 10:19). In the New Testament, Jesus reminds us of stories (e.g. The Good Samaritan) where unlikely people help those who are in critical need to illustrate how small signs of grace and hospitality serve as powerful acts of resistance against societal norms. He challenges his followers to provide unconditional hospitality to the “least of these” by saying, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35-40). Christ himself was just an infant when his family fled to Egypt as refugees escaping infanticide (Matt. 2), and this aspect of his birth narrative is often a powerful source of hope for migrants and refugees facing persecution.

These narratives and so many others provide a foundation upon which Judeo-Christian practices of hospitality and justice stand. Regardless of perceived guilt or innocence, the circumstances for migration or impoverishment, of political beliefs or legal ramifications, strangers are welcomed, fed, and cared for simply because they are human. If we take the idea of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God reflected by our human likeness (Gen. 1:26) in all its diverse forms—seriously, then these narrative traditions invite and challenge us to care for our refugee neighbors and those seeking safety in the same way we would also care for God.

As more [houses of worship](#) and [college campuses](#) attempt to claim Sanctuary in the current political climate, it's important that we reflect deeply and openly on the history and particularities of the movement. In this series, I hope to highlight the lessons that we can learn from the past, the ways in which current struggles might be similar, and the realities that are new and strategies that will have to be different

in our context.

I come to this work as a student of the movement and an educator drawn to people, communities, practices, and perspectives that welcome and support “outsiders” because I—for various reasons—have felt like an outsider for most of my life. Those experiences have therefore fundamentally shifted how I engage theology and the world. The search to find different forms of sanctuary and hospitality is what brought me to seminary and now moves my work, and I see it is a need that translates across borders that divide us. I think Sanctuary and radical hospitality have much to teach us if we let the stories of those who have gone before us and those presently fighting the good fight wash over and renew our spirits.

Mapping the Terrain

In the 1970-80s, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were rife with civil war. The governments of these countries, financially [supported](#) by [U.S. military interests](#) that aimed to combat “communism,” intimidated, tortured, and killed their own people for the sake of power and control. The conflicts prompted thousands of Central Americans to migrate North to the U.S. hoping to find temporary stay and safety. This is the context in which the modern Sanctuary Movement was born. The Underground Railroad and anti-Vietnam war protests can also be labeled as [“proto” Sanctuary Movements](#) in their own right, due to the ways in which allies and co-conspirators sheltered and protected individuals, aiding in their safety from oppressive institutions.

However, two individuals are credited as the “founders” of the Sanctuary Movement: Jim Corbett and Rev. John Fife. Although these white men are identified as the most visible movement leaders, it’s important to remember that they were among many who put their privilege on the line for the cause. Others like Father Ramón Dagoberto Quiñones, Sister Darlene Nicgorski, Jack Elder, and Stacey Merkt compromised their safety and credentials to aid refugees. Leaders emerged in different cities all over the country and their contributions are just as important.

[Corbett](#) was a bilingual Quaker rancher living and working in Arizona, not far from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In May 1981, he learned about a Salvadorian hitchhiker who was apprehended by Border Patrol agents without cause. Corbett knew of the political unrest happening in Central America and was concerned the Salvadorian man would be deported. He discovered the man was likely being held at the detention center outside Nogales, Arizona, and went there to ask about him.

Corbett was astonished to see how many people were being held in the detention center. Hundreds of men, women, and children sat crammed in tiny cells without explanation. He heard their border crossing stories and fears of uncertainty. The more he listened and spent time with those in detention, the more he felt compelled to act out of his Quaker faith convictions. He pawned some of his farming equipment and used the money to bail out 20 refugees, bringing them back to his very small home. He dipped into his personal savings to convert his garage into makeshift living quarters, but Corbett was struggling to find sustainable solutions to helping others still in detention. He began envisioning a *network* that could support and assist refugees, using secret routes and safe houses similar to that of the Underground Railroad to transport and protect those vulnerable to deportation and violence. Corbett's theology of a "new" underground movement combined elements of Latin American liberation theology and the biblical concept of Sanctuary, which served as the focal point of a broader faith-based coalition.

Corbett regarded Sanctuary as an *activity* of communal solidarity *with* the oppressed. Sanctuary was a verb demanding attention and deep commitment, not just an idea relegated to the pages of ancient texts. Rather than establish individual "islands" of non-violent resistance, Corbett saw a possibility for a broader, national network of communities that engaged in faithful witness to the covenant of creating the Kin(g)dom in the here and now by supporting and sheltering refugees as neighbors carrying the likeness of God. It was at this point Corbett contacted his good friend, Rev. John Fife.

John Fife was a minister of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, and sat on the Tucson Ecumenical Council (TEC), which worked to address the practical and spiritual needs of their community. Fife's connections to the TEC and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were seen by Corbett as useful networks that could support broader Sanctuary efforts. Eventually, both groups made public commitments to support Sanctuary activities at all costs, including defying law enforcement and government agencies, putting their own comfort and privilege at stake for the protection of refugees.

In the years that followed, hundreds of communities and thousands of individuals supported Sanctuary efforts, and new manifestations of the Movement eventually took shape. For a time, the Movement seemed to dissolve completely but saw resurgence in the early 2000s, which was led by predominantly undocumented immigrants, former refugees, and people of color. The New Sanctuary Movement of

the 2000s took off in cities like Portland, New York, and Philadelphia, and shifted the needle on key components of immigration policy, work that is still on-going and supported by activists across the country.

Today, we are seeing the remnants of this vibrant and rich tradition of solidarity and allyship that is evolving to meet the needs of our current context. With a proposed registry for Muslims and threats of mass deportations, there is a renewed call to embody and claim Sanctuary as a way of standing with those who are most vulnerable.

Looking Ahead

As we continue to see people around the world flee war, genocide, economic degradation, and the effects of climate change on their homes, it's critical that we discern and interrogate our direct and indirect roles in these conflicts, and how we address the needs of refugees and our displaced neighbors in humanizing ways that embody a faith-rooted liberation praxis. The Sanctuary Movement offers to us a paradigm that calls us into action.

Sanctuary is not a theoretical gesture but a tangible witness of God's justice-seeking love. It is the very fabric of the Torah and teachings of Jesus. It gives new meaning to the Incarnation by pushing us to confront the reality of God's presence in those who are vulnerable and seeking protection. Sanctuary reveals that religious spaces are far from politically powerless but instead are actually positioned on the frontlines of where important struggles might take place.

Some Practical Resources for Congregations interested in Sanctuary:

[Sanctuary not Deportation](#): the national Sanctuary Movement website that lists active coalitions and tactic/strategy resources for congregations.

[How to Become a Sanctuary Community 101](#): video webinar organized by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.'s Synod of the Northeast.

[Refugee crisis: how can you respond?](#) Resources from the Mennonite Central Committee.

About the Author:

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