

Honduran woman who sought sanctuary in a church will not be deported

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue



Rosa del Carmen Ortez Cruz at the door to the kitchen at the church where she took sanctuary from deportation in North Carolina, February 27, 2020. (RNS photo/Yonat Shimron)

For nearly two years Rosa del Carmen Ortez-Cruz took sanctuary from deportation at the Church of Reconciliation, not knowing if she would ever be able to emerge from

her confinement.

On February 26, a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that immigration authorities may not deport her. The unanimous ruling means Ortez-Cruz will be entitled to stay and work in the United States for the foreseeable future.

“I feel like there’s been a weight lifted from on top of me,” Ortez-Cruz told Religion News Service. “I still have some fear, but I feel more secure. Now I know if they come after me, they’d have to release me.”

Ortez-Cruz fled Honduras for the United States in 2002, after her domestic partner, the father of her first child, stabbed her multiple times in the stomach. The Church of Reconciliation and the Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship—both meet in the same building—offered her refuge from immediate deportation two years ago.

Ortez-Cruz did not qualify for asylum because she waited too long after crossing the US border to file a claim. But she argued she cannot return to Honduras, since she fears her ex-partner may kill her. The court agreed, finding that the Board of Immigration Appeal erred by not providing any evidence that it would be safe for her to return to Honduras.

Nationwide, there are 47 undocumented immigrants who have publicly announced they are taking refuge in US religious congregations, according to Church World Service, which maintains a database.

Isaac Villegas, pastor of the Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, said a total of 160 people from 11 congregations volunteered to help Ortez-Cruz during her nearly two-year confinement. A volunteer stayed at the church with her every night in case Immigration and Customs Enforcement came knocking. Others helped wash her laundry once a week (the church doesn’t have a washing machine) and buy her groceries.

The two main churches also raised money to foot her legal bills.

“We’ve grown together,” said Villegas. “She’s part of our church life. We’ve come to share lives together. It will feel strange and probably empty to not have her here.”

Ortez-Cruz said her biggest hardship was being away from her children who have been living with relatives in Greensboro, 55 miles away. She plans to stay in Chapel

Hill and looks forward to bringing her family there.

Her one sadness is knowing that many others who have taken sanctuary in churches don't have any idea when they may be able to leave. In the 22 months she has been at the church, she formed close bonds with many of them.

"They're happy for me," she said. "But I can sense they're sad, too." —Religion News Service