

The Sanctuary Movement and Central American Activism in Los Angeles

by

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The Sanctuary movement of the 1980s combined religious faith and social activism to provide refuge for Central Americans fleeing violence and persecution and to raise awareness of the responsibility associated with U.S. policy in the region. Features of the Los Angeles area, such as its large Latino population, provided support and a sense of community; in this sense the city itself was a sanctuary. The presence of many Central Americans who brought their experience and skills in organizing in their home countries to the development of solidarity and refugee organizations in Los Angeles were also an important resource for the Sanctuary movement. The development of the Sanctuary movement was characterized by the interaction of spiritual ethics and religious practice with activism in raising consciousness and providing legitimacy. The strength of the movement lay particularly in the profound experiences and narratives of refugees, shared through personal connections that spanned cultures and countries.

Keywords: Sanctuary movement, Religious activism, Los Angeles Latinos, Central American refugees, Persecution in Central America

Sanctuary began because people were responding to a human material need. But you very quickly discover, in the process, that it can't stop there. You're just putting on a band-aid if you don't address the total situation.

—Rev. Donald Smith

You cannot be witness to human suffering and not be convinced of the condition of social sin. We are all responsible unless we take a stand and speak against it.

—Father Luis Olivares

The Sanctuary concept was to confront, as well as to help.

—Rev. Teresa Santillana

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Solidarity and spirituality converged in a remarkable way in the 1980s in what became known as the Sanctuary movement. Under the Reagan administration, Central America had become the focal point—some would say obsession—of U.S. foreign policy interests. The victory of the Sandinistas over the Somoza regime in Nicaragua and the development of revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Guatemala were interpreted in a cold war context as major threats to U.S. security right in “our backyard.” The Reagan administration spent billions of dollars supporting the Salvadoran military efforts to crush the revolutionary movement in El Salvador and financed the contra war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

In response, U.S. religious groups, students, teachers, and other activists as well as Central Americans who had fled to the United States created and sustained a broad array of movements with regard to Central America that challenged the Reagan doctrine, providing numerous opportunities to confront U.S. policy in Central America and the problematic interpretation on which it was based. Among them was the Sanctuary movement, organized by churches, religious groups, and other activists to accompany and provide safe haven for undocumented refugees fleeing from violence and persecution in Guatemala and El Salvador but denied political asylum in the United States and in danger of deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS; Golden and McConnell, 1986). Drawing on both religious and humanist traditions, it directly challenged the moral and political basis of support for repressive regimes in Central America and the corresponding immigration policies of the U.S. government. In the process it became a very effective means of raising public awareness of events in the region and the implications of U.S. policy (Smith, 1996: 113). Increased public awareness fueled criticism of the assumptions on which Reagan’s foreign policy was based.

As a movement that combined religious faith and social activism in confronting unjust government policies, the Sanctuary movement has particular relevance today. First, although the context has changed, there are striking parallels between U.S. policy in the 1980s and that of the early twenty-first century. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. interests were again presented in terms of a moral battle of good vs. evil—at that time, with the Soviet Union, or “evil empire” (portrayed as the instigator of revolutions in Central America), and more recently against terrorism and “the axis of evil,” used to justify a preemptive war against Iraq, increased surveillance in the United States, and heightened militarization of the borders. Again terrorists, drug dealers, smugglers, and undocumented immigrants have been lumped together as “criminals” subject to imprisonment and/or deportation by Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE), which has taken over the enforcement functions of the INS. Over the past several years, ICE has rounded up thousands of undocumented immigrants and sent them to detention centers, many of them under private contract with little or no government supervision and in distant cities, involving long-term separation from families and friends.

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Second, as a religious movement for social justice, the Sanctuary movement raises questions regarding the role of religion in political activism. In recent years, religious activism in the United States and particularly in U.S. politics has been dominated by conservative and right-wing perspectives. Religion has, however, long been an important source of progressive activism on behalf of social justice. It was a powerful source of motivation for the antislavery movement in the nineteenth century and for Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez and their followers, among others, in the twentieth. It has particular salience in the lives of immigrants both in reinforcing traditions and customs of their cultures and in helping them to become incorporated into the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007a; 2007b).

Although most of the literature on the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s focuses on what was happening in Tucson and Chicago, Los Angeles is a strategic part of the story of religious activism on the part of refugees and immigrants and their advocates. In the 1980s, for example, the greater Los Angeles area was a major destination of Central American refugees and immigrants and an important center of activism with regard to Central America. The Central American immigrant population included a number of activists who had been involved in political, union, student, and other types of organizations in their home countries and continued their activism in Los Angeles, playing a critical role in solidarity movements and initiatives on behalf of refugees. Central Americans added new players and new dimensions of community within a historically contiguous Latin American, primarily Mexican, community. One goal of this article is to help to fill in the gap in the existing literature by describing the Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles and analyzing the significance of the region's status as a major point of entry for immigrants, including a Central American refugee population with a cadre of dedicated activists.

To develop a better understanding of the relationship of religion to social justice movements through the lens of the Sanctuary movement, we will draw on studies of social movements and advocacy networks. The next section introduces some major issues of these studies as they apply to the Sanctuary movement, concluding with specific questions to be addressed in the rest of the study. The following two sections provide a brief overview of the Sanctuary movement in the United States and the Los Angeles context. Subsequent sections address the Sanctuary churches, the Sanctuary movement in the Jewish community, and cases of sanctuary in nonreligious institutions and analyze the movement in the context of activism in Los Angeles. A final discussion section summarizes the study in the light of issues and questions regarding the role of religion in social justice movements and assesses its impact and implications.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ADVOCACY NETWORKS

The 1980s Sanctuary movement can be seen as combining elements of both social movements and advocacy groups or networks. Similar to social movements, the Sanctuary movement challenged the status quo; more broadly, it aimed to effect a fundamental change in policy. Its tactics included disruptive behavior—civil disobedience—as well as other measures. But in other respects

it resembled an advocacy network. While the protagonists of social movements generally organize around issues and grievances that affect them directly and have limited access to institutional sources of power, advocacy groups are generally motivated by broad principles and values, such as human rights, environmental concerns, and the status of women, and have greater access to resources (including both material and nonmaterial resources) and institutional connections. Social movements may in fact have recourse to advocacy groups (non-governmental organizations [NGOs]) or advocacy networks to obtain access to resources; advocacy networks may incorporate social movements and benefit from access to affected populations that can assist in promoting their cause (Haber, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Hochstetler, 2000: 178).

In both social movements and advocacy groups, consciousness raising is an important strategy. Two tactics identified as important in consciousness raising are information politics and symbolic politics (Brysk, 1995; Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 16–23). Information is operative on at least three levels: activists themselves must be informed of issues and motivated to act; information is a means of raising public awareness and motivation; and information is needed to convince relevant policy makers of a given position and to counter contrary perspectives. Information involves both a command of the facts and an emotional component that can move and motivate people. Testimonies by affected individuals can be particularly effective in raising awareness regarding the human and moral implications of an issue. Other mechanisms include the strategic use of information and language to frame issues in a way that reinterprets the dominant framework. One example would be the efforts of indigenous groups to reframe the celebration of Columbus Day, from the commemoration of the “discovery” of America to a condemnation of the European conquest and subjugation of indigenous peoples.

According to some analysts of social movements, consciousness raising may be the most important long-term consequence of a movement, whether or not all of its specific goals are achieved. One element of this is the transformation of the participants themselves. The individual who comes out of the movement is often not the same as the one who entered it. One may gain an awareness, a new way of looking at things, or in some cases a sense of efficacy and empowerment through the development of new communication, organizing, and leadership skills (Coutin, 1993: 43; Haber, 2006).

Symbolic politics may involve the deliberate creation of a symbol or the use of an individual, group, event, or image that is evocative of a particular issue or movement. The awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to the Guatemalan Quiché activist Rigoberta Menchú in 1992 was not only a tribute to her activities on behalf of peace and human rights but also a means to raise consciousness regarding indigenous rights. The assassination of the Brazilian environmental activist Chico Mendez raised public awareness of the problems of tropical deforestation (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 22–23).

In addition to the centrality of consciousness raising in their tactics, social movements and advocacy networks have in common the need to mobilize resources; these may include material resources, values and ideas, and access to media, among others (Haber, 2006). In comparison with other NGOs and advocacy groups, religious groups have access to a rhetoric based on doctrine that calls for compassion and caring for others. Religious institutions also have

access to resources, both material (the ability to tap financial resources and space) and intangible (the ability to call on volunteers and institutional networks) (Nawyn, 2007: 146–147, 151–153).

The discussion that follows is based on a review of secondary sources, newspaper articles and documents, and interviews with former Sanctuary activists and addresses several questions. To what extent and in what ways did the context and socio-geographic “space” of Los Angeles, in particular its existence as a destination for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees and a center of activism with regard to Central America, help to shape the character of the movement that emerged there? What were the movement’s strategies, and how did it draw on religious traditions and values to educate and raise consciousness about the conditions of refugees and the role of U.S. policy? What kinds of resources did the movement have access to, and to what extent were they shaped by the movement’s religious connections? What was the impact of the Los Angeles sanctuary movement? How did it affect those most deeply involved? What were its implications, if any, for their religious values? for social activism? Finally, what lessons can be drawn from the movement as it developed in Los Angeles and, more broadly, for social activism in the future?

THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

What became known as the Central American Sanctuary movement originated in Tucson, Arizona, when Jim Corbett, a Quaker, and John Fife, a Presbyterian minister, were threatened by INS officials for illegally escorting undocumented Salvadoran refugees into the United States from Mexico and providing shelter for them in churches and houses. Deciding to go public, Corbett, Fife, and other activists declared the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, where Fife was pastor, a sanctuary for Central American refugees on March 24, 1982.

The date had symbolic importance: it was the second anniversary of the assassination of the outspoken Salvadoran archbishop Msgr. Oscar Romero. Msgr. Romero had used his influence as bishop and later archbishop to speak out against abuses committed by Salvadoran government and security forces against civilian populations in El Salvador and to urge the United States to end its aid to El Salvador. He was assassinated while saying mass by members of a right-wing death squad and is venerated as a martyr by Salvadorans as well as members of churches and religious groups in the United States and other parts of the world.

To explain and justify their action, Corbett and Fife drew on Hebrew traditions of refugee cities and the practice of medieval Christian churches of granting refuge to fugitives and historical experiences such as the nineteenth-century underground railway for escaped slaves in the United States. The Tucson Ecumenical Council Task Force on Central America wrote to counterpart groups and congregations throughout the country notifying them of the action. Corbett activated the Quaker network, emphasizing Quaker involvement in the abolitionist movement and the underground railroad; activists from other denominations also notified their churches. Churches and religious organizations throughout the country endorsed the movement, and churches in

several cities, including Los Angeles, agreed to declare sanctuary as well (Tomsho, 1987; Smith, 1996).

The movement grew rapidly. By early 1983 there were 45 Sanctuary churches and synagogues throughout the country and 600 secondary Sanctuary groups that provided endorsement and support. The logistics of the movement were complex: an "underground railroad" of activists in Mexico and the United States smuggled immigrants across the border and drove them to nearby cities of Tucson, San Antonio, and Los Angeles, from where they were transported to different churches and/or families across the continent. At each stage along the way the refugees required food, shelter, and ongoing transportation; at their final destination, specific churches and congregations would take responsibility for the refugees for up to a year, arranging for housing, food, education and literacy training, jobs, health care, and legal services (Lorentzen, 1991).

The rapid growth in the number of refugees and the complexity of the Sanctuary process required a centralized system of coordination, a responsibility assumed in 1982 by the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America (CRTFCA), a coalition of religious and social action groups that had been formed after the assassination of four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador in December 1980 (Crittendon, 1988). In addition to coordinating the transportation and placement of refugees, the Chicago Task Force printed and distributed various documents, including a "nuts-and-bolts" manual for Sanctuary organizers with detailed instructions on every phase of the process and how to use it as a political tool.

While the movement had initially been motivated by humanitarian concerns based on the precarious status of undocumented Central American refugees, unable to obtain asylum in the United States but facing persecution and possible death if deported to their home countries, humanitarian concerns inevitably raised political issues: What were the conditions from which refugees were fleeing? Why were many of these refugees—despite personal experiences of violence and persecution—refused asylum in the United States? And why was the U.S. government supporting Central American governments and military forces that were perpetuating these conditions? In Tucson, the decision to go public and the selection of individual refugees to give testimony were seen as ways to educate the public regarding U.S. policy in Central America as well as to confront, through civil disobedience, the perceived injustice of the U.S. government's failure to provide asylum to refugees.

The educational and consciousness-raising component of the movement was of major importance and was achieved at several levels. First, the media coverage generated by public declarations of sanctuary became a means of informing the public about issues related to Central America and Central American refugees. Second, the decision of a particular congregation to declare its church a sanctuary was generally preceded by programs to educate the congregation on conditions in Central America. The idea of declaring sanctuary often generated considerable debate, since it could be interpreted as an act of civil disobedience for which the church itself or individual parishioners could be held liable. Activists stressed the importance of fully informing members of the congregation, including providing "material on the historical and political situation in Central America, the legal situation and consequences,

theological and biblical background of 'sanctuary,' and financial cost and support for such a project" (Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, n.d.). Members of the congregations were to be given the opportunity to raise questions and to hear "all sides" of the issue.

Of particular significance was the role of the refugees themselves, who gave testimony of their personal experiences of violence and persecution. Their presence provided direct and tangible evidence of conditions most parishioners were otherwise aware of only indirectly and constituted a direct link between the humanitarian and the educational goals of the movement. As one Los Angeles activist who had been deeply moved by the testimony of a Salvadoran refugee put it, "As someone who learns experientially, I learn from other people's journeys. . . . Sending people to places across the country was invaluable as far as educating for change. I stand in awe of . . . the Salvadoran or Guatemalan families that risked everything to be the only [Central American] family in Vermont or the Midwest somewhere" (interview, March 2, 2006).

Ironically, this emphasis on the power of testimony sometimes led to tensions and conflicts within the movement regarding the extent to which it should be used to raise political issues. Some groups gave priority to assisting refugees with compelling stories of persecution in their home countries who were able to communicate effectively and willing to testify openly about their own experiences. The priority given to the consciousness-raising and political aspect of the movement as a means of involving churches in the campaign against the U.S. military role in Central America became a source of frustration for those who were primarily concerned with the humanitarian goal of securing sanctuary for refugees (Crittendon, 1988; Lorentzen, 1991; Smith, 1996).

The Sanctuary movement continued to grow. By the middle of 1984, 150 churches throughout the country had declared sanctuary, and the movement had been endorsed by 18 national religious denominations and commissions. The INS, which had apparently hoped that the movement would be short-lived, began to arrest Sanctuary activists in Texas and Tucson in early 1984, and in 1985 the Justice Department announced the indictment of 16 Arizona Sanctuary workers, including Corbett and Fife.

But if U.S. officials had hoped to stifle the movement, they were disappointed. The arrests, the indictments, and every phase of the trial received extensive media coverage. The indictments were condemned by the National Council of Churches, and groups of Roman Catholic bishops and religious orders affirmed sanctuary "as biblical and moral." In June 1985, the Central Conference of American Rabbis endorsed the Sanctuary movement, including civil disobedience. As one respondent said, with the arrests in Tucson the movement exploded. By the middle of 1985 there were 250 declared sanctuaries. Increasingly, these included not only religious institutions but also secular institutions, among them university student groups and individual cities, as well as the state of New Mexico. By 1987 there were over 420 Sanctuary groups, including 305 churches, 41 synagogues, 25 ecumenical religious groups, 24 cities, 15 universities, and 13 other secular groups (Smith, 1996: 185).

THE LOS ANGELES CONTEXT

The influx of Central American refugees and immigrants to Southern California during the 1970s and 1980s occurred within a particular demographic, economic, and political context. Demographically, it was part of a dramatic increase in immigration from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, including Mexico, that was changing the composition of the region's population. Economically, Los Angeles was in the throes of a transition to a post-Fordist society, as traditional manufacturing plants closed down, new high-tech industries proliferated, and the numbers of garment factories and workshops increased. The area was also becoming a major Pacific Rim center with the growth of trade and finance as well as real estate and construction, including a dramatic expansion of downtown office buildings, hotels, and restaurants. One result was the creation of low wage jobs as waiters, dishwashers, busboys, hotel maids, and garment workers, among others, which drew on the labor of new migrants, many of them from Central America and Mexico.

Los Angeles, historically a conservative city, was also experiencing political change. A turning point was the mayoral election of 1973, in which a coalition of liberal activists, labor leaders, and representatives from Asian and Latino leadership joined African Americans to elect Tom Bradley the first African American mayor of a major U.S. city (Anderson, 1996). In the meantime, the emergence and growth of the Chicano movement in the 1970s and the growing political power of Latinos resulted in the increased political presence of Mexican Americans and other Latinos (Moore and Vigil, 1988). By the 1980s African Americans, Latinos, and, increasingly, members of other ethnic groups as well as liberal and progressive liberals were moving into positions in city government.

In contrast to the relatively progressive turn in local government, federal government officials dealing with immigration issues in the Southern California region took a conservative position with respect to undocumented Central Americans and other undocumented immigrants. Immigration judges routinely turned down the requests of Salvadorans and Guatemalans for political asylum. In the United States as a whole, only 2–3 percent of Salvadorans and Guatemalans who applied were granted asylum during the 1980s. Harold Ezell, the Western Regional INS director, took a hard line toward "illegal immigrants"; on several occasions in the 1980s INS officials invaded factories and other workplaces to round up workers suspected of being undocumented.

It was in this context that Los Angeles became an increasingly important center of activism with regard to Central America. The upsurge in Central American migration to Southern California beginning in the late 1970s included students, labor leaders, religious representatives, and others who had been persecuted because of political involvement in their respective countries. By the early 1980s some of these had become active in refugee assistance, solidarity work, and other initiatives in connection with events in Central America and/or Central Americans in the United States. In 1981 El Rescate, a multiservice organization for Central American refugees, was formed by Salvadoran immigrants and U.S. religious and humanitarian organizations with the assistance of the Southern California Ecumenical Council. In 1983 the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) of Los Angeles was formed by a Salvadoran

refugee committee, U.S. church leaders, attorneys, and community activists, and later that year the Clínica Oscar Romero, sponsored by El Rescate, opened to provide medical services to Central American refugees.

The Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles was coordinated by the Southern California Inter-Faith Task Force on Central America (SCITCA), a coalition of churches, religious groups, and other organizations concerned about Central America. SCITCA merged the religious and the political through legal and educational activities as well as the Sanctuary movement. The first chair of the Sanctuary Committee was Sister Jo'Ann De Quattro, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and of the staff of the Peace and Justice Center of Southern California (an organization of religious women that became increasingly involved in work with regard to Central America and Central American refugees during the 1980s). Sister Jo'Ann, who had worked as a volunteer with the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) in East Los Angeles, became aware of conditions in Central America at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio in 1980, where she was in a study program at the time the four U.S. churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador.

Sister Jo'Ann believed that work with Central American refugees required a coordinator who could relate both to refugees (including having Spanish-language skills and appropriate cultural sensitivity) and to people in churches. She saw the ideal candidate in Gloria Kinsler, who had moved to Los Angeles in 1983 after having spent 13 years in Guatemala, where Gloria and her husband, a Presbyterian minister, were missionaries. Although she had worked as a volunteer with the church in Guatemala and was widely read and well-versed on conditions in Central America, Gloria had never considered herself an activist. As coordinator, Gloria had primary responsibility for going to the airport or train station to meet refugees sent from San Diego or other locations and taking them to churches or homes or to the Casa Rutilio Grande (named for a Salvadoran priest who had been assassinated by death squads), which had been established by the social service center of La Placita (Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church) as a temporary shelter for refugees. Refugees were also referred by El Rescate, CARECEN, the Romero Clinic, or the Guatemala Information Center, a local service organization of Guatemalan and North American activists established in 1980.

Gloria also went to different churches each weekend to speak about the Sanctuary movement. As did other Sanctuary activists, she drew on prior religious and humanitarian practices and examples in explaining the movement to others: she noted parallels in the situation of Central American refugees to the experiences of her in-laws, who had been persecuted as missionaries in North Korea and had been taken in by churches in South Korea. In some cases she was accompanied by refugees who would testify about their personal experiences, although she was careful not to bring refugees to churches that, wanting a "balanced perspective," had also invited INS officials to participate. Ezell and other INS representatives warned congregants that they faced serious penalties if they harbored "illegal aliens."

A significant proportion of Central American immigrants and refugees coming into the United States came to Los Angeles. Jim Corbett, the founder of the Sanctuary movement, estimated that more than half of the Central American refugees coming through Tucson went to Los Angeles (Stammer, 1983). Los

Angeles became a major transfer station for refugees who were sent to sanctuary churches in other parts of the country following consultation with the Chicago Religious Task Force or as the result of requests by specific churches; it is probable that most of the refugees sent to different locations in the United States or Canada came from Los Angeles.

Many, however, preferred to remain in Los Angeles, where they often had families and friends, rather than travel to areas of the country where they could expect to find few other Latinos and would feel isolated and vulnerable. The large and growing Central American population made the refugees feel relatively safe. As a Los Angeles activist said, "In a sense, Los Angeles *was* sanctuary." One example of the ability of the refugee communities to absorb new arrivals was a case in which all but 6 of a group of 80 refugees bonded out (released on bond) of El Centro (a detention center in Southern California) had been incorporated into the refugee community in a period of three days (Corbett, 1983).

THE SANCTUARY CHURCHES

The first church in the city of Los Angeles to declare sanctuary was the First Unitarian Church in Pico Union, an area just west of downtown Los Angeles that has historically been a major entry point for immigrants and in the 1980s for Central Americans coming to the Los Angeles region. The church had a reputation for political activism: during the 1980s various programs involving speakers from Central America, films, and other events took place there, and organizations such as the Guatemala Information Center held meetings there.

In March 1983 the González family was officially welcomed and moved into a room in the church. Roberto González, who had been active in labor organizing in El Salvador and had been elected to the National Assembly in 1972 (although not allowed to take office), had fled the country in 1974 after several of his colleagues were killed and he himself received death threats. Subsequently his wife joined him after she herself was threatened, and their daughter was born in the United States. But while Roberto was able to obtain asylum and his daughter was a U.S. citizen by birth, his wife was ordered to be deported. The family appealed to the church, which had already announced its support for sanctuary. Roberto and his wife expressed amazement at the solidarity and humanitarianism they encountered at the First Unitarian Church and churches of other denominations associated with the Sanctuary movement. They were also impressed with the fact that the Central American conflict was discussed in church services and that some members of the clergy and congregation had made efforts to learn Spanish in order to communicate with the refugees and other Latinos more effectively.

For the safety of the Gonzalez family it was considered necessary to move them from one church to another every 10 days. Finally the INS agreed to let Sra. González remain in the country. Members of the family continued to be involved with the Unitarian Church; they were active in the Congregación Oscar Romero, a group of Latino Unitarian-Universalists established to reach out to the Latino community in Los Angeles, and Roberto became directly involved in the Sanctuary movement. Their daughter eventually received a

scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles, and graduated from there and later from Loyola Law School with honors.

One of the churches scheduled to receive the González family during its pilgrimage from church to church was the Unitarian Universalist Church in Santa Monica. Following a six-week course on conditions in Central America and the Sanctuary movement and an intense debate over the objections raised by some members of the congregation regarding the legality of the move, the congregation voted 118 to 9 to declare itself a sanctuary. Although the case was resolved before the family was scheduled to move into the Santa Monica church, the congregation was notified by contacts in Davis, California, about a Konjobal family from Guatemala that needed to be bonded out of the INS detention center. Ernesto and Elena, with their two children (ages 2 and 4) and a niece (age 18), had been picked up by the INS while crossing into Arizona; the men were separated from the women and children, and Elena and the children were taken to the El Centro detention center. The Santa Monica congregation and the Davis Religious Community for Sanctuary raised the funds to bond them out. Maggie Pipes, wife of pastor Ernie Pipes, assumed primary responsibility for the family. She had previously been active in various organizations and campaigns, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the United Farm Workers, and the National Farmworkers' Ministry. She and her husband had recently returned from an eight-month sabbatical in Eastern Europe, where they had visited the concentration camps at Treblinka and Auschwitz—a very powerful and moving experience that she later compared to the conditions faced by Central Americans suffering persecution in their home countries.

Elena and the children stayed at the Pipes's home in Santa Monica for a month before moving to Davis to join their cousin in a house rented by the Davis interfaith group. Elena, who at this point did not know where Ernesto was or even if he was still alive, found out that she was pregnant. She was told that she could legally have an abortion (she had had C-sections with her first children), but she decided to have the baby after she had a dream in which Ernesto had returned and she had a new baby for him. In the meantime, Ernesto, having been told by the INS that his family was back in Guatemala, had agreed to a voluntary departure. On returning to Guatemala and learning the truth, he had made his way back through Mexico and walked from the border to Tucson, where he was picked up and driven to Davis—arriving on Valentine's Day to be united with his family, including a new son, Jaime. Maggie and Ernie continued to maintain contact with the Pipes family; as Maggie said, "When you bond out a family; they're yours for the rest of your life." Years later, Ernie officiated at the wedding of their daughter, and Maggie was matron of honor.

One of the most active Sanctuary churches in Los Angeles was the Pico Rivera United Methodist Church. Fernando Santillana, the pastor, had become acquainted with liberation theology through the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian. He and his wife, Teresa, had become more directly aware of conditions in El Salvador through a Salvadoran refugee, Ofelia, who was working for a neighbor and began coming to their church. After several months, Ofelia had asked for help in bringing her husband and three children into the country. When they arrived they were given a room in the church, and this led to a discussion of whether the church should become a Sanctuary church.

The congregation voted to become a sanctuary in January 1983, and the Pico Rivera church became the third church in Los Angeles County and the first Methodist church in the country to declare sanctuary. At that time, the congregation was largely Mexican American with some Anglos, and many knew little of conditions in El Salvador. Some left the church, but Fernando said, "We gained more than we lost." The first refugees to receive sanctuary at the church following the official declaration were two educators from El Salvador, Juan and Rosa Jiménez. They had left El Salvador when Juan, who had been a school principal, discovered he was being investigated by the Salvadoran government for allowing peasants to use printing equipment for antigovernment pamphlets. Several teachers they knew had been killed.

A classroom was converted into living quarters, and the congregation provided food, clothing, English classes, and a small weekly allowance. Juan found work as a janitor, and after three months he and Rosa had saved enough money to rent an apartment elsewhere in the area. The church continued to assist refugees, many of them referred by other churches, Central American refugee organizations, or the Romero Clinic, and as of January 1985 had assisted 29 refugee families with food, clothing, housing, jobs, and language and vocational classes (Escalante, 1983; 1985). In one case, the church extended help to a Salvadoran soldier who had been assigned to a death squad in El Salvador but fled when he came under suspicion because he was unable to torture people. His presence caused anxiety among other Sanctuary recipients, most of them campesinos, and there was relief when he was reassigned to Chicago. Throughout this period Fernando sought to educate the congregation through sermons and outreach, stressing the need to serve as well as to be involved, for example, by participating in demonstrations. At the same time, he believed that the refugees themselves, as "living witnesses," had the greatest impact.

A substantial number of Salvadorans and Guatemalans coming to Los Angeles during the 1980s lived in the Pico Union area, and the Santillanas were instrumental in opening a storefront Christian base community called Adelante on Pico Boulevard, a major thoroughfare. While Fernando concentrated his work at the Pico Rivera church, Teresa worked primarily at Adelante, which became a major space for meetings of various kinds as well as regular worship service, including a monthly mass and communion with the Catholic congregation. Its activities also included classes in English as a second language, after-school programs for children, sewing classes for women, a theater group that drew on Salvadoran traditions, a music group, bible study, and various community programs.

One of the major centers for the Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles was Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church (known as La Placita), the oldest Catholic church in Los Angeles and one that thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, including many who no longer lived in the area, attended every Sunday for mass. Before declaring sanctuary in December 1985, La Placita had already been operating as a haven for refugees under the energetic direction of two priests, the late Father Luis Olivares, a Claretian, and Father Michael Kennedy, a Jesuit.

Father Olivares had been on a successful career path in the Catholic Church hierarchy when he began working with farmworkers who were organizing

with the help of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in the 1970s. As he expressed it, he experienced a conversion. "You may initially get involved in a cause for altruistic reasons, because you want to help 'those poor people,' but pretty soon you are fighting with them and they are doing more to convert your way of thinking than you are doing for them" (Hernandez, 1990). Eloquent and charismatic, he became known as "the poet of the movement" because of his inspiring sermons—"with words like wings," according to UFW Vice President Dolores Huerta. He was also involved in organizing UNO. In the early 1980s he openly criticized U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran government, and on becoming pastor of La Placita in 1981 he made it a haven for undocumented immigrants and refugees (Hernandez, 1990; Ramos, 2003).

Father Kennedy had been an activist from the time he was at St. Louis University in the Vietnam War years. He joined a group whose members burned their draft cards and engaged in street theater at the trial of Dan Berrigan (a priest who was involved in antinuclear and antiwar work). He also worked with youth in Appalachia, farmworkers in California, and student groups and took students to Mexico on immersion trips. His first assignment as a priest was an inner-city parish in San Diego, and there he was contacted by John Fife, who asked him whether the parish could become part of the Sanctuary network. His superior was concerned about publicity but gave Father Kennedy tacit approval for less overt support for refugees. Wanting to continue to work with refugees and recognizing the centrality of La Placita in Los Angeles, Father Kennedy met with Father Olivares. Father Olivares said, "We need that—where do you want your office?" He formed the Centro Pastoral to address refugees' need for a place to stay, legal help, medical care, and other services. The refugees gave testimony at different churches that helped to provide support for the center.

Mario Rivas, a young Salvadoran who had been active in student politics in El Salvador and had become involved in the Salvadoran solidarity movement after his arrival in Los Angeles, began working at La Placita in 1984. As a child in Ilopongo, he had worked with the local priest, "a very energetic, outgoing, creative, and compassionate" man who had organized a kind of Christian base community for children. The children had played an active role in the community, visiting the sick and elderly every Sunday to help with cleaning, cooking, and other chores. When he went to mass in the United States, however, he found the church a cold place with no community or social-action commitment and for a while stopped attending. This changed when he went to La Placita. Working with Olivares and Kennedy gave him "a new sense of church, a new environment, lots of support." For Mario, the public declaration of sanctuary at La Placita in 1985 was a historic moment both for the community of faith and for the Central American refugees. "It was a place where we could tell our own stories—a place from which we can challenge U.S. policy toward Central America."

As elsewhere, the decision to declare sanctuary was preceded by extensive debate and tension. Referring to the refugees, some parishioners said, "Let's just give them a tortilla and frijoles." According to Mario, they didn't want to hear the refugees' stories or to confront the idea that the United States was to blame for what was going on. On the whole, however, the parishioners were very supportive, and Mario particularly credited the Mexican and Mexican

American congregation. "Mexicans made it possible for La Placita to be a sanctuary."

La Placita took in hundreds of refugees, housing them at the church or at the Casa Rutilio Grande. Others were sent to locations throughout the United States and Canada. La Placita worked closely with the Sanctuary Committee of SCITCA to coordinate speaking engagements by refugees in churches and other locations, and Mario became actively involved in the establishment of the National Alliance of Sanctuary Committees, which promoted dialogue across the different Sanctuary communities throughout the country with an emphasis on the link between the situation of refugees and U.S. foreign policy.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Religious traditions and the experience of the Holocaust and of Jewish refugees after World War II were important referents for members of the Jewish community. Evely Laser-Shlensky, at that time social action chair of the Southwest Region of the New Reform Movement, spoke at synagogues throughout the region to educate the congregation about sanctuary and to elicit support for the movement. Evely's father had been active in efforts after World War II to help Jewish refugees in Europe and North Africa who had been displaced or no longer felt safe in their respective countries, enabling them to resettle in Israel. The ethical basis of his work was *tzedak*, a Jewish concept that combines justice with a strong obligation to act. Subsequently Evely herself became involved with refugees through the synagogue, initially in Chicago, working with Chileans escaping persecution from the military regime in Chile, and subsequently in Santa Barbara, helping to settle Laotian and Cambodian boat people. The Sanctuary movement presented a new challenge, since Central Americans were not recognized as refugees and many were undocumented. As in the case with churches, many feared that the synagogue might lose its tax-exempt status.

Evely prepared for her advocacy work through extensive study of Judaism and refugee law to make "a Jewish case for sanctuary, a case that would be religious, not just political." She drew particularly on the biblical prophets who challenged the powerful in the name of justice (Shlensky, n.d.):

The prophets gave voice to those whose cries went unnoticed. It was a unique prophetic function to bring to light the silent suffering and anguish of the oppressed and powerless. Eyes of the comfortable, then as now, were generally averted at the sight of the downtrodden. But no one could hear a prophet of Israel and claim ignorance. Knowledge was intended to beget involvement. . . . The Sanctuary movement walks a prophetic path when it confronts a government that is using its power callously and carelessly in its dealing with Central American refugees, people whose presence here is a testimony to the human rights of the countries to whom we supply arms and military training.

Citing the Geneva Convention and the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, she framed the process in terms of adhering to U.S. and international law, which was being enforced by U.S. officials in a discriminatory manner when they welcomed refugees from unfriendly countries and rejected those, such as Guatemalans and Salvadorans, who came from countries that the United States was supporting.

Several synagogues in Southern California took a stand on the Sanctuary movement. A few took in refugees; others provided support. Evely's congregation, the B'nai B'rith synagogue in Santa Barbara, agreed to sponsor a refugee family. As she described the decision in a subsequent presentation,

One of my most cherished memories is the night our temple board voted to become a Sanctuary congregation, that is, to join the Sanctuary movement which had formed to protect refugees who were fleeing perilous situations in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s. The night of the vote was a night we chose to side with the victims of violence, to assert our duty to protect human rights, to call on our Jewish experience of fear and flight. It was a choice that the board knew might entail a willingness to tangle with a government—our own—that was intent on criminalizing the protection of human rights. It was an evening that felt to me to be full of miracles, a time I had yearned for but was not sure I would ever witness.

Soon afterward the congregation was contacted about a pregnant Guatemalan woman in Tucson who was being sought as a coconspirator in the Sanctuary trial. She had fled after her husband, a labor activist, had been murdered in Guatemala and she learned that she herself was in danger. The trip from Guatemala through Mexico was harrowing; at one point she was gang-raped. The Sanctuary group in Tucson had learned about her, and Jim Corbett had brought her from Mexico to Tucson.

When the Sanctuary workers were indicted, activists in Tucson wanted her hidden, both for her own protection and because any testimony she gave at the trial could implicate the defendants, especially Jim Corbett. The synagogue in Santa Barbara agreed to take her in, and she lived with Evely and her family for approximately six months. Members of the congregation provided support, including medical and dental care, and several women gave her a baby shower. Evely was at the hospital when the baby was born, and mother and baby returned to live with Evely and her family.

Evely continued her activism in the Sanctuary movement and other solidarity and educational activities with regard to Central America throughout the 1980s. Between 1984 and 1987 she volunteered at the Peace and Justice Center of Southern California and spent a year working with El Rescate as outreach coordinator to the religious community. In 1987 she accompanied Salvadoran refugees returning from the Mesa Verde refugee camp in Honduras to El Salvador and wrote articles about the trip for local newspapers and the national Jewish press. She frequently attended meetings of SCITCA and was cochair, with Mario Rivas, of its sanctuary committee during the late 1980s.

Although not all Jewish congregations that took a stand on sanctuary took in refugees, they supported the movement in a variety of other ways. One example was the Shir Shalom (now Beth Shir Sholom), which met in the basement of St. Bede's, a west-side Episcopal Church. Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels had first become involved in social action as a rabbinical student, when he participated in an interfaith service at the Riverside Church in New York City and a subsequent march protesting nuclear armament. On coming to Los Angeles he participated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in a project working with survivors of Hiroshima and military people who had been affected by nuclear tests in Nevada. It was through the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Westside Ecumenical Council, and the Union of American Hebrew

Congregations (now the Union of Reform Judaism) that he began to hear of churches taking part in the Sanctuary movement.

He and the temple leaders (who included several women, including the president of the congregation) decided to have a series of Friday evening explorations of sanctuary. The first presentations included one that addressed the issue from a Jewish perspective, using biblical and Holocaust texts, and a presentation by a Jewish physician from El Salvador who described medical conditions on the ground. A third presentation was by a couple who presented a two-person, four-character play, *Miracle at Midnight*, about a Danish Jewish family seeking sanctuary on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Denmark. The play was very moving, and afterward the congregation worked with Medical Aid for El Salvador to sponsor a child whose arm had been blown off by a bomb. The child and his aunt were brought to Los Angeles, where a member of the congregation, an orthopedic surgeon, reconstructed the arm through prosthesis. Another member of the congregation housed the child and his aunt at her home, and the congregation helped with clothing, housing expenses, and other needs.

Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels and his congregation have continued to be involved in social-justice issues, among them a program for the freedom of Soviet Jews. He himself was a founding member of CLUE (Clergy United for Economic Justice) and is now chair of the Santa Monica Bay Inter-Faith Committee and the Holocaust Committee. "For us," he says, "these are not political issues; they are spiritual issues. They are moral and ethical issues. For Jews, it is not a matter of choice. . . . It is an obligation."

SANCTUARY IN NONRELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

In the Los Angeles area as elsewhere, several universities and colleges declared sanctuary, beginning with the University of California in Riverside, where in February 1984 the Graduate Student Council—the first U.S. student group to do so—declared the campus a safe haven for Central Americans fleeing violence. By the end of 1985 students at 10 campuses in California, including the Universities of California at Berkeley, Irvine, and Los Angeles, California State University Northridge, and Pitzer and Pomona Colleges in Claremont, had declared support for the Sanctuary movement. For the most part they did not house students on campus but raised funds, provided food, worked with Sanctuary churches, and, in some cases, provided off-campus housing. In November students from 9 Southern California colleges and universities grouped in the Inter-Campus Sanctuary Network opened a safe house for undocumented Salvadorans and Guatemalans with the purpose of paying rent and utility bills and providing food.

The sanctuary decisions at Pitzer and Pomona Colleges in May 1985 were interesting for several reasons. Several congregations in the Claremont area had declared sanctuary, beginning with the Claremont Friends Meeting in December 1982. Fifty Guatemalans and Salvadorans had been settled in the Claremont area. In contrast to other universities and colleges, where decisions were made by student representatives, the Claremont students voted directly, and more than 80 percent in each college voted in favor. This was also the only

case in which the students voted to support the Sanctuary movement on the grounds that the refugees were protected under the Geneva Convention. As one Pomona student (quoted by Valle, 1985) put it, "What we are doing is neither illegal nor an act of civil disobedience. We are upholding international law. We call upon our government to do the same."

Several cities issued resolutions supporting sanctuary. In February 1985 the city of Berkeley declared itself a city of refuge: city employees would not cooperate with the INS in investigations or arrests of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. Later that year the Los Angeles City Council began to debate the possibility of declaring Los Angeles a sanctuary city, much to the chagrin of INS commissioner Harold Ezell (quoted by Becklund, 1985): "This is a ridiculous and a disastrous kind of thing for a city council to do that has no business being involved in national policy. . . . Los Angeles is the illegal [alien] capital of America in the first place. This would send a message out that Los Angeles is 'the place' to be free from the INS."

Los Angeles City Councilman Michael Woo was particularly active in pushing the sanctuary declaration. In an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* (Woo, 1985) he wrote:

It pains me to think that the fate of the Central American refugees will be the same as the fate of the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s who were denied entry into several democratic nations—including the United States—as they desperately sought to escape certain death under Nazism. We have learned from those experiences and the vow of "never again" should apply today in this case as well.

On November 27 the City Council voted to declare Los Angeles a sanctuary city. Ezell immediately began a campaign to cut off federal funds for the city. Concerned about this threat, the council rescinded the resolution and passed a compromise resolution in February 1986, omitting the word "sanctuary" but retaining most of the provisions of the declaration, including the stipulation that law enforcement personnel not report undocumented immigrants to the INS.

THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT AND ACTIVISM IN LOS ANGELES

The Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles was one of many programs and initiatives by religious and interfaith groups as well as nonreligious groups and activists on behalf of Central American immigrants and refugees. It was a period of intense activity, with "meetings all day and three or four nights [a week] as well. . . . It was like life or death; we were on the frontlines of war," according to one activist. In addition to sanctuary work, SCITCA was involved in education programs, demonstrating at El Centro, where undocumented immigrants picked up by the INS were being held, lobbying Congress on behalf of refugees and to change U.S. policy in the region, taking delegations of congresspersons to Central America, and accompanying Salvadoran refugees from refugee camps in Honduras to their home communities. When the six Jesuits from the Universidad Centroamérica were murdered in El Salvador in 1989, activists, including members of SCITCA, formed the Wednesday Morning Coalition, which demonstrated weekly in front of the Federal Building

in downtown Los Angeles. Sanctuary workers were involved in many of these efforts.

Both El Rescate and CARECEN, which had been established through the efforts of members of the Central American community working with religious and other activists, provided a range of services to Central Americans in Los Angeles, including food provision, literacy and ESL programs, social service referrals, and legal counsel. Lawyers from these and other agencies represented refugees in asylum and stay-of-deportation hearings and were involved in legal cases challenging the treatment of refugees by the INS. Mayor Bradley appointed an advisory committee on Central American refugees that held hearings in June and July 1986 on conditions in Central America and refugees' experiences of persecution and torture. In 1985 a number of churches and religious, refugee, and legal organizations, including many in Los Angeles, joined in a class action lawsuit (*American Baptist Church v. Thorburgh*, known as the ABC case) contesting the rejection of asylum claims by Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees, and a settlement in 1990 required the INS to reopen 150,000 asylum cases—a move that was widely seen as vindication of the Sanctuary movement.

When the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which prohibits the hiring of undocumented immigrants, was passed in 1986, churches and religious groups lobbied to change the law and investigated legal options such as finding loopholes in the law or obtaining exemptions on the basis of conscientious objection. The law imposed particular challenges in Los Angeles given the large undocumented population in the region, which included not only refugees but also many other immigrants, chiefly Mexicans and Central Americans.

IRCA inaugurated a shift in organizational priorities from refugees to the undocumented and from housing and immediate needs to more permanent issues such as jobs. As noted above, many undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles worked in low-wage factory or service jobs. Religious activists, working with Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants, opened LISTO, a job training and employment program for domestic workers modeled on a similar program in Berkeley. Prompted by activists in the community, Councilman Woo was instrumental in forming a task force on street vending that brought together city representatives, merchants, activists, and representatives of the vendors themselves—many of them Central Americans—to legalize street vending. At the end of 1986 several agencies working on immigration issues formed the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles (CHIRLA) to coordinate immigrant services provided by private and public agencies. CHIRLA has played an important role in efforts to protect undocumented immigrants from exploitation in the workplace, including assistance to day laborers and other low-wage workers.

The peace agreement in El Salvador in 1992 and the winding down of the war in Guatemala in the early 1990s reinforced the shift already under way from a focus on Central American refugees to a growing recognition of the permanence of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan population in the Los Angeles area. Some groups specifically organized with regard to Central American refugees, such as SCITCA, had ceased operations by the early 1990s. However,

several of the individuals and institutions involved in the Sanctuary movement continued their activism on behalf of Central Americans and other immigrant populations and/or became involved in other social-justice initiatives.

Father Luis Olivares (until his death in March 1993) and Father Michael Kennedy, as well as Mario Rivas, continued to work on issues related to immigrants and refugees. In 1994 Father Kennedy began to work at the Dolores Mission in Boyle Heights, which had also been a Sanctuary church. Through its Proyecto Pastoral it sponsors a range of programs on behalf of the Boyle Heights community, including counseling for single parents, a day-care program for infants and toddlers, an after-school program for at-risk students, and food, shelter, and counseling for homeless men. Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels has been involved in such issues as homelessness and workers' rights and has worked with the Beth Shir Sholom congregation on issues having to do with Israeli-Palestinian relations and promoting interfaith dialogues that bring together Muslims, Christians, and Jews (Phelps, 2006). Fernando and Teresa Santillana have continued their teaching and organizing, Fernando as director of Latino ministries for the Methodist Church in southern California and Teresa, who completed seminary at Southern Methodist University, as minister of a multicultural church in Hawthorne.

DISCUSSION

RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

What distinguished the Sanctuary movement from other forms of activism with regard to Central America was its ability to draw on religious values and traditions to reframe the issues and directly challenge the moral foundation of the Reagan doctrine. In effect, it shifted the administration's interpretation of "good vs. evil" to confront the immigration policies of the U.S. government and its support for repressive forces in Central America. Churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations gave the Sanctuary movement a moral and religious legitimacy in challenging U.S. foreign and refugee policy that other movements lacked.

Religious values and traditions were particularly significant in appealing to congregations that could be expected to share these values and to be familiar with many of the traditions underlying this appeal. According to one activist, a priest, "The motivating thing is people's faith. It's easy to disregard the contribution of the religious community. . . . But that period [the 1980s] showed tremendous force, energy, the ability for social change when people of faith come together to work for social justice." Appeals to religious beliefs involving a social-justice component implied an activist commitment that involved taking risks and speaking truth to power. Failure to act when confronted by social injustice was not an option. For Central Americans and those working with them, Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in March 1980 after speaking out repeatedly against government repression, and the four U.S. churchwomen who were assassinated in El Salvador in the following December were powerful examples of those who spoke out against social injustice.

The experience of the Holocaust, the example of those who attempted to help the Jews, and the negative example of many who failed to do so were

especially important for the Jewish community but also for many from different religious backgrounds. A central concept common to different religious groups was the biblical notion of accompaniment. In addition to the accompaniment—or absence of accompaniment—of the Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, some drew on the implications of the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the underground railroad for escaping slaves in accompanying Central Americans as they crossed the border and traveled to churches and safe houses in the United States. The religious and humanitarian connotations of accompaniment are invoked in terms of North Americans and Central Americans standing together, protecting each other. In the context of strong religious conviction, face-to-face connections allowed for a powerful convergence of humanitarian concern, political awareness, and spiritual and religious awakening.

RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES

Like other movements and advocacy groups, the Sanctuary movement drew on a variety of resources and utilized a range of tactics in its efforts to educate and raise consciousness about the refugees, the conditions from which they were fleeing, and U.S. involvement in the region. Education, including information sessions at churches and other venues, the use of films and videos, and theatrical productions, was an important element of the movement. Congregational decisions to declare sanctuary were often preceded by months of preparation, including information regarding the issue—on conditions in Central America, U.S. policy in the region, and the plight of refugees, as well as what was involved in declaring sanctuary. Declarations of sanctuary often drew media coverage and provided opportunities to educate the public. The testimonials of refugees were a major source of education for both congregations and broader publics as well as the activists who accompanied them in various phases of the sanctuary experience. Their presence, their stories, and their reasons for being in the United States were impossible to ignore: they countered the official justifications for U.S. policy, bridged the cultural divide between North Americans and Central American refugees, and galvanized increased consciousness, support, and action.

Sanctuary activists had a critical resource in their ability to draw on national religious institutions and networks, both denominational and interfaith. What began as a local decision to declare sanctuary was quickly transformed into a national movement as churches and synagogues informed their respective congregations of the Tucson initiative and in some cases publicly supported it.

THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT IN LOS ANGELES

The distinctiveness of the Los Angeles Sanctuary movement rests in the characteristics of the city as a refuge and of its Central American population as both refugees and activists. During the 1980s, Los Angeles was a dynamic city, experiencing rapid economic, political, and demographic change—economic change that created jobs in services and industries providing work for immigrants, political change from a conservative to a more liberal ethos that was more accepting of immigrants and refugees, and demographic change fueled

by the influx of immigrants not only from Central America but also from Mexico and other Latin American countries, Asia, and the Middle East. As was suggested by one activist, Los Angeles was itself a sanctuary in several respects. It shared the anonymity of many large, diverse cities in which one could, in effect, "be invisible." It was a city of immigrants in which Central Americans found themselves among many other newcomers. Furthermore, it had a significant Mexican and Mexican American community. While the relationship between Central Americans (particularly Salvadorans) and Mexican Americans in the Los Angeles area has often been contentious, Mexican Americans and Central Americans also shared a language, customs, and particularly religious beliefs and traditions. As in their communities of origin in Mexico and Central America, several churches serving Latino populations in Los Angeles drew on the principles of liberation theology, and Christian base communities were formed in several churches. The Sanctuary movement became an important site for interaction between new Central American immigrants and the more established Mexican American community.

Finally, many Central Americans coming to Los Angeles at the time had been politically involved in their respective countries and brought their experience of organizing in their home countries to activism around Central America in Los Angeles. In this respect Los Angeles differed from cities such as Chicago, another important center of the Sanctuary movement, in which the Central American population was smaller and lacked legal documentation, with the result that most were less directly involved in immigrant-related initiatives.

Central Americans in Los Angeles initiated their own political organizations and refugee committees and joined with both religious and nonreligious activists in various organizations and movements dedicated to ending U.S. involvement in Central America and providing protection and support to Central Americans in this country (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001). Their identity as both refugees and activists in the Sanctuary movement as well as other activities enabled them to have a significant voice in educating and raising consciousness regarding the conditions in Central America that were forcing thousands of their compatriots to leave their respective countries and in creating networks providing resources for newly arriving immigrants and refugees.

THE IMPACT OF THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

The combination of the appeal to religious principles and the ability to draw on the institutional resources of different religious denominations and interfaith groups was undoubtedly key to the effectiveness of the Sanctuary movement. The justification provided by religious beliefs and traditions as well as participation by churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions gave a moral legitimacy to Sanctuary work in the eyes of many people who would normally not have been inclined to question U.S. policy, let alone challenge it. Religious institutions also provided resources, including networks linking churches, synagogues, and other religious groups throughout the country, that were undoubtedly important in the broad reach and rapid growth of the movement.

Because the Sanctuary movement in Los Angeles (and nationally) was one of numerous programs and campaigns on behalf of refugees and/or in opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, it is difficult to determine precisely

what its actual impact was, but there is little doubt that it had a profound effect at several levels. With respect to its most immediate, humanitarian goals, hundreds of Guatemalan and Salvadoran individuals and families in danger of deportation received protection and support from churches, synagogues, and other institutions. It was also an effective means to educate church congregations as well as the general public regarding the plight of Central American refugees and the broader issues involved. In Los Angeles as elsewhere, the Sanctuary movement was successful in generating extensive media coverage; the compelling stories of refugees reached far beyond their immediate audiences of church congregations and other groups and generated sympathy in broad sectors of the population.

An important question is how the movement might have changed the thinking and subsequent activism of those most directly involved. Many of them were also involved in other activities such as working with refugees in the establishment and development of refugee organizations, delegations to Central America, giving talks and writing articles, and participating in marches and demonstrations. Moreover, many of the individuals and activists who became involved in the Sanctuary movement had already had experience in social-justice movements, and several churches had a history and tradition of social activism. Thus while the Sanctuary movement was rooted in a particular time around a particular issue or set of issues, for many of the individuals and institutions that became involved it was part of a continuum of social-justice activity that preceded their activism in it and continued after it was over.

But while the 1980s was a period of heightened awareness and sense of purpose for many involved in activism with regard to Central America and although many had had prior experience in social-justice movements, the Sanctuary movement seems to have motivated activists, particularly religious activists, in a special way. As one expressed it, "What makes an engaging social issue for me is one that combines elements of a religious response, a political response, and a human and social interaction. When all of these come together, it is much more meaningful." In turn, some felt that the Sanctuary movement and particularly the interaction with refugees also affected religious beliefs and practices. According to a minister, "Involvement changed religious views, although it was a slow process. The God involved was one who loved and walked with the people, one who laughs and cries with you, a relational and human God." Another activist stated, "The Sanctuary movement became my church."

Sanctuary work could also be personally empowering. Prior to her work as Sanctuary coordinator for SCITCA, Gloria Kinsler had not considered herself an activist: "I came [to the Sanctuary movement] straight from being a housewife. I learned to analyze social struggles in Latin America. My work in the Sanctuary movement awakened me as a person." When Gloria and her family moved to Costa Rica in the late 1980s she guided delegations of religious people who came to Central America. Evely Shlensky became aware, she said, "of my own ability to be effective in my own religious community about issues that had a lot of religious implications." Teresa Santillana believed that her work in the Sanctuary movement and the Christian base community had

deepened her personal commitment and had been critical in her involvement in organizing groups both in the United States and Latin America.

Interaction with others in the movement, often with those of different backgrounds and religious beliefs, was something activists also valued. "It was a wonderful ecumenical movement," said one activist, recalling friends she had made she would have otherwise never known. While some had been involved in interfaith activities before, for others it was their first—or most profound—experience of working closely with people of different faiths. For some, it was an introduction to what was happening in Central America and the U.S. role there and to an understanding of historical patterns of U.S. intervention in Latin America. It led to a general questioning of U.S. policy not just in Central America but more broadly, both among individuals and among congregations.

The most important element in this impact was undoubtedly the interaction between the Sanctuary congregations and activists and the Central American refugees, which was a distinctive and unforgettable experience for many. In contrast to the situation with the anti-Vietnam War movement, for example, the presence of Central Americans in the United States and their personal stories provided a deeper perspective on events in Central America and the role of the United States. Sanctuary workers who transported refugees and/or housed them in their homes spoke of the importance of personal contact and the relationships they established, which in some cases resulted in lasting friendships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVISM

The Sanctuary movement in the 1980s cannot be precisely replicated, but it offers several lessons for activism around social-justice issues. The most important is the role of religion in providing moral authority. Churches and synagogues gave the Sanctuary movement a moral and religious legitimacy in challenging U.S. foreign and refugee policy that other movements lacked. Many Sanctuary activists as well as religious congregations were inspired by religious principles involving a moral commitment to act on behalf of social justice, even to the point of committing to acts of civil disobedience to challenge U.S. policy.

In addition, Sanctuary activists were able to draw on the networks and institutional resources of their respective denominations and other religious groups, which were very effective in organizing efforts, information sharing, and coordination of action at a national level. In the case of Los Angeles, many churches and religious activists were part of or already working with the Latino community and were instrumental in the establishment of several organizations concerned with Central American immigrants and refugees, among them CARECEN, El Rescate, and the Romero Clinic. Education and consciousness raising were important at several levels, involving both the respective congregations and, through the media, the general public.

Churches and religious communities continue to be active in social-justice work, including support for immigrants threatened with imprisonment and/or deportation. One response was a November 2006 call for a new Sanctuary movement that would stand on the side of immigrant families in danger of

being separated by harsh immigration policies of the 1990s and 2000s and against ICE raids on immigrant homes and workplaces. The new movement has an educational component aimed at helping mainstream America understand the need for reform and advocating for policy change at the national level. In contrast to the situation in the 1980s, however, the policies that need changing are complex and difficult to understand, nativist groups have cultivated a climate of fear by scapegoating immigrants, and the immigrants themselves are not refugees but “undocumented” individuals and families with deep roots in local communities. As a result, the new movement has had to redefine “sanctuary” as “standing on the side of immigrant families and workers” and to work tirelessly to cut through the fear that has been generated so that people can hear the facts about immigration and why current policies need reform. Church members are challenged to make immigrants visible as brothers and sisters, as children of God. Key to this new strategy is the formation of partnerships between immigrant and nonimmigrant congregations in the pursuit of education and change.

Faith-based groups have been involved in numerous other initiatives on behalf of immigrants and in opposition to U.S. immigration policy. With the change in government and the promise of the Obama administration that immigration reform will be on the agenda, religious groups across the country loosely coordinated in a variety of networks (the new Sanctuary movement, the Welcoming America campaign, and the Inter-Faith Immigration Coalition, among others) are focusing on local and national campaigns to reframe the immigration issue and to support humane and comprehensive immigration reform.

The association of religion with right-wing economic and social policies over the past decade has tended to obscure the significant role that religious people have had and continue to have in the work for social justice. At a time when policing and exclusion are ascendant worldwide, visible in recent years in fortifications and deportations in the United States, public understanding of policy is critical. The Sanctuary movement represented an effective means of educating the public, raising awareness as it raised questions. Both the practical and the ethical were critical to its success as a collective effort to bring about social change. Then as now, religious people played a vital role, drawing on spiritual and humanitarian traditions to speak truth to power, to challenge regressive policies at home and abroad, and ultimately to build toward mutual understanding and inclusion.

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