

Tucson Citizen (Arizona)

June 13, 2007 Wednesday

## A sacred space for immigrant rights

**BYLINE:** Kim Bobo and Alexia Salvatierra

**LENGTH:** 680 words

Today, we are at crossroads. We face outcomes that could be disastrous or promising as our policymakers consider comprehensive immigration reform.

Now Congress is advancing legislation that would decimate the notion of family even as it favors high income people over struggling workers.

Millions of illegal immigrants are part of our congregations. They contribute to their communities with tax dollars, their labor and their service.

As two leaders of interfaith organizations, we have seen increasing numbers of families in crisis - fearful that they would be separated from their loved ones.

We were moved by the courage of Elvira Arellano, a young mother from Chicago who has defied her deportation order since last August, supported by the church that dared to stand with her.

Workplace raids have terrorized our congregations. Our brothers and sisters have been detained, left in custody and unsure of their fate. Eventually, many are deported to a country that they may not have seen for decades.

As religious leaders, we are compelled to take a stand, not on the politics, but on the moral imperative of immigration reform that is both effective and humane.

The New Sanctuary Movement was officially launched May 9 with public events in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Diego and Seattle. It is a movement that provides legal advice and physical shelters for families who are in danger of being deported in a climate that increasingly demonizes illegal workers.

Sanctuary has myriad meanings for people of faith. It literally refers to a sacred place for congregants to worship and be renewed.

But the image also transcends physical boundaries with its implications of protection and support for those in need.

Even more powerfully, the image of sanctuary in the context of support for immigrants seeking justice can awaken the moral imagination of our nation.

The New Sanctuary Movement is rooted in that belief that untold numbers of immigrants need our support, refuge and - most importantly - action, as we challenge a broken immigration system. This system is breaking homes, families and lives, leaving in its wake an injustice that demands our response.

Sanctuary as a safe place dates back to scriptural times. We also draw from the contemporary context in the early 1980s.

Thousands of Central American refugees poured into the United States, fleeing life-threatening repression and human rights violations at the hands of U.S.-backed governments and death squads.

Many congregations stepped up to provide shelter and sustenance while federal immigration policy denied political asylum to the vast majority simply because their governments were allies of the United States.

Ultimately, the Sanctuary Movement helped change national policy and protected tens of thousands of individuals.

The audacity of those faith leaders who threw open the doors of their houses of worship and offered those in need a safe place gives us an inspirational charge.

We acknowledge that the large-scale immigration of workers and their families is complex. It is rooted in historical, global and economic complexities that cannot be answered with simplistic or purely reactive public policy solutions.

But this problem is not insurmountable. Together we can make a concerted effort to make real the promise of America.

Our innovation, commitment to fairness and history of moving through our historic injustices to achieve equality serves as a powerful precedent to right this egregious wrong.

The stories and our voices of the immigrants remind us that another America is possible, one that permits us to act on the moral objectives that we espouse during worship services in our everyday lives.

As our nation debates the immigration reform it's a lesson we must all remember.

\*

Kim Bobo is founder and executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice ([www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org)), which mobilizes religious support for low-wage workers. The Rev. Alexia Salvatierra is the executive director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice of California ([www.cluela.org](http://www.cluela.org)). Both are members of the New Sanctuary Movement.