

Chicago Tribune

May 9, 2007 Wednesday
Final Edition

Illegal immigrant sanctuaries set; Religious groups in 5 cities back plan to win sympathy

BYLINE: By Antonio Olivo, Tribune staff reporter

On Wednesday, religious groups in Chicago and four other cities plan to announce a new "sanctuary" movement for illegal immigrants reminiscent of the 1980s, when churches and synagogues defiantly harbored civil war refugees from Central America.

But the illegal immigrants aren't likely to be living in churches, they won't be evading authorities and nobody is risking going to jail. Even participants say the cause today is less clear cut than the moral outrage decades ago over U.S.-supported government death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Where some religious leaders back then felt compelled to risk jail in their efforts to protect refugees who had entered the U.S. illegally, faith communities are less willing to take such a brazen stance against the federal deportation raids now occurring nationwide, organizers of the new movement said. With deep divisions over illegal immigration across the country, the New Sanctuary Movement is less a campaign to shield those facing deportation, and more of an effort to win sympathy for the families affected by the raids, they said.

"When you're dealing with such a complex issue, you're going to get people all over the place," said Rev. Juan Carlos Ruiz, a Roman Catholic priest in New York who is coordinating the effort there. "Even within our own congregations, people are saying: 'Why do they come here? Why are they illegal?'"

Kim Bobo, executive director of Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice, a labor group that is spearheading the effort, said a handful of undocumented immigrants across the country are currently part of the effort.

None of the "sanctuary" seekers, so far, are in Chicago, though Bobo cited as the movement's inspiration the case of Mexican national Elvira Arellano, who has eluded deportation since last summer by taking refuge in a Humboldt Park church.

Unlike Arellano, however, the families who'll be part of the movement will not be fugitives, Bobo said. Instead, they'll be free on bail, awaiting deportation proceedings, with federal officials apprised of their whereabouts, she said.

Most of those brought into the movement will likely be "mixed-status" families, in which some members are illegal while others are citizens, reflecting the largest conundrum in dealing with the country's 12 million undocumented immigrants, Bobo said.

Participating churches, mosques and synagogues -- currently only three in Chicago have signed on -- aren't likely to take in their charges, but will accompany the immigrants to court and help them out financially if needed, said Rabbi Laurie Coskey, in San Diego.

"It isn't a matter of hiding families," she said. "It's a matter of providing spiritual, emotional and physical sanctuary."

Leaders are uncertain how participating groups will react should a deportation order be given and a moment of confrontation with federal agents arise.

"I think people are going to have to cross that bridge when they come to it," Coskey said. "We hope that the advocacy for the family prevents them from being deported."

Such hesitancy stems from both the ambivalence over illegal immigration today and the shame of seeing religious leaders criminally charged during the '80s sanctuary movement, said Joel Fetzer, a Pepperdine University professor who has written about sanctuary movements.

"After that, mainstream churches who didn't have a long history of civic disobedience were a little more afraid to get involved" and the movement eventually died, Fetzer said.

"It may be that this is sort of a first step to get people involved," Fetzer said.

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