New Sanctuary Movement extends ‘prophetic hospitality’ to immigrants

By Ted Parks

Early one morning last May, government agents entered the Southern California home of Liliana, a Mexican immigrant, to arrest and deport her. With Liliana — she gives only her first name — were her three young children and her husband, who are American citizens.

After the agents learned one of Liliana’s children was an infant, they agreed not to take her away immediately. As she agonized over who would care for her two-month-old son, Liliana remembered hearing about a Los Angeles church offering sanctuary to immigrants in her situation.

Today, Liliana remains in California, under the watchful eye of the U.S. government ... and the New Sanctuary Movement, a network of interfaith coalitions and churches working to address the consequences of what many see as a broken immigration system. "Prophetic hospitality" for immigrant families about to be separated is a cornerstone of the movement. Liliana’s current host is the United Church of Christ in Simi Valley, outside Los Angeles.

The new movement echoes the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, which provided shelter to refugees from war-torn Central America. The recent effort grew out of a January 2007 meeting in Washington, D.C., of representatives from various denominations, religious organizations, and activist groups longing to help families torn apart by immigration policies.

The meeting took place in the wake of objections by Cardinal Roger Mahony of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles to legislation proposed in Congress in late 2005 that many religious leaders thought would criminalize efforts to give aid to undocumented immigrants.

With New Sanctuary officially launched in various locations last May, interfaith coalitions in about 35 cities today are either providing refugees sanctuary or are making efforts to do so, said Alexia Salvatierra, Lutheran pastor and interim executive director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, California. The organization collaborates with agencies in other places to coordinate New Sanctuary activities, and leaders are working on a permanent administrative structure for the movement, Salvatierra said.

New Sanctuary asks participating congregations to sign a pledge to "Take a public, moral stand for immigrants’ rights," and to "Protect immigrants against hate, workplace discrimination, and unjust deportation." Churches also promise to bear witness to how immigrants suffer under the current system.

As the new movement has grown, its outreach has broadened, said Kristin Kumpf, national coordinator for New Sanctuary. While providing refuge remains a core component, participating organizations and congregations also support families reeling from workplace raids and sponsor educational campaigns to counter anti-immigrant sentiment.

When New Sanctuary congregations offer refuge, they focus on immigrants the government has ordered to leave despite a solid record of working to support their families. Those receiving protection must have no criminal past. Preferably, they have children who were born in the U.S.
Immigrants must also be willing to reveal their plight to others. Far from hiding away in churches, those helped make their whereabouts public information. Some of them, ready to testify to what they’ve suffered, serve as “prophets” for the movement, Salvatierra said, “willing to stand up publicly and tell their stories so that people know what is actually happening to families as a result of this broken system.”

This public stance sets the New Sanctuary Movement apart from its 1980s counterpart. To protect people fleeing violent regimes but refused asylum by the U.S. government, the original Sanctuary Movement withheld refugees’ locations and identities from authorities. In the New Sanctuary Movement, leaders disclose information about the immigrants they are helping as they try to legally resolve their cases.

New Sanctuary leaders insist their actions are in compliance with the law. “We are not hiding anyone,” Salvatierra said. “If ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] wants to come and get them, they will, but they have not yet.”

Salvatierra is confident authorities will respect the age-old practice of using churches as places of refuge. “The biblical tradition of sanctuary is to provide a sacred space for someone … who cannot get a fair hearing in response to their crime,” she said.

But offering protection in churches to people under deportation orders troubles some.

Robin Hoover, pastor of First Christian Church in Tucson, Ariz., says the new movement distorts the traditional understanding of “sanctuary.” Hoover is co-founder and president of Humane Borders, a Tucson-based organization that provides water and humanitarian aid to migrants traversing the harsh terrain of the U.S.–Mexican border in Arizona.

For Hoover, “sanctuary is a very technical practice by ethical and religious people that predates Christianity and even Judaism.”

To describe the concept, Hoover looks to the customs of the Middle East, where a person camping in an oasis was “morally obligated” to extend protection to a stranger seeking refuge from a pursuer. The person in pursuit was likewise obligated to stay outside the camp out of respect for the universally acknowledged right to seek safe haven.

Along the border, “sanctuary is still practiced” as churches provide short-term protection for migrants recuperating from the desert or needing temporary shelter, Hoover explained. Border authorities have traditionally respected the churches’ right to offer refuge, he said.

Hoover points out that New Sanctuary’s assumption that the government will not enter a church protecting immigrants under deportation orders is untested. If a participating congregation winds up in court and loses, he fears, authorities will have a new precedent to violate spaces regarded for centuries as hands-off.

Huberto Pimentel, the Disciples’ national pastor for Hispanic Ministries, also wonders if the highly public nature of the New Sanctuary Movement puts undocumented immigrants as a whole at greater risk. Disciples congregations have undocumented members, Pimentel stressed. “This is the reality we have to face,” he said. “As the church, we have the doors open for worship.”

Pimentel hopes Disciples will try to understand the complexities of the immigration issue, encouraging Disciples to focus “not on the law side … but on the Bible side,” especially the scriptural mandate to welcome the stranger and sojourner.

Jennifer Riggs, director of the Disciples’ Refugee and Immigration Ministries, said Disciples’ views on immigration vary widely. She sees New Sanctuary as one option for churches that want to reach out to those in need, describing the movement as a way to make “a political statement to say these are people that we care about and … we need to be involved in reforming our immigration laws.”

Riggs was unaware of any Disciples congregation currently providing refuge as part of the New Sanctuary Movement.

David Bell, director of the Disciples’ Yakama Christian Mission in Washington, has worked to inform local Disciples ministers about New Sanctuary. For Bell, taking in immigrant families provides church members intimate insights into their plight, as well as emotional links to people touched by a complex issue.

As congregations develop close bonds with people they risk losing to deportation, New Sanctuary “helps folks know what the heartache is” of being cut off from loved ones, Bell explained. “There are hundreds of people being deported every day, and nobody feels anything about it.”
Bell sees a parallel between the aims of the New Sanctuary Movement and the Disciples’ own past. Beginning as a unity movement on the nineteenth-century frontier, “Disciples literally moved into the land of others ... and used that land to support their families,” Bell said.

“They are a people who ... should know what it means to move out of their own country into the country of others,” Bell noted. Formal affiliation with New Sanctuary aside, “the need to care for people ... who are in a land that’s not their own ... should be part of who we are,” he said.

For now, Liliana is just grateful for the opportunity to stay near her children and contest the order that would split her family. “I feel very fortunate,” she told DisciplesWorld. “Many mothers like me did not have this opportunity.”

She recalls staring into the mirror one day as she brushed her teeth, thankful for her husband and children but asking what she really wanted out of life.

She wonders if her near arrest, and her life now in the refuge of New Sanctuary, could be answers to that question.

God determines each person’s destiny, she says. “Mine is to be here and lend support and keep on and struggle.”

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