

L.A. church offers migrants sanctuary

Our Lady Queen of Angels joins a national effort to shield illegal immigrants and press for changes in the law.

By Louis Sahagun
L.A. Times Staff Writer
latimes.com

March 23, 2007

Construction crews at Our Lady Queen of Angels are putting the finishing touches on a controversial new addition to the historic downtown Los Angeles church: living quarters in which to harbor an immigrant family facing deportation.

The 188-year-old parish, also known as La Placita, is among the first churches in the nation to pledge participation in a new sanctuary movement expected to be launched in late April as a faith-based effort to help undocumented families and to press for immigration reform.

"Here, we're taking our concerns about the nation's broken immigration system to a new level," Father Richard Estrada said this week as he stood in the church's second-floor storage room, above the altar, that is being converted into housing.

"Families broken by broken laws, and churches broken by it all," Estrada said. "You hear about it happening in churches across the city."

Inspired by Elvira Arellano, an illegal immigrant from Mexico who has taken refuge at a Methodist church in Chicago since August to avoid deportation, leaders of the first sanctuary movement in 25 years are interviewing hundreds of prospective candidates for refuge and dozens of churches willing to accept the legal risks of taking them in.

Advocacy groups, including Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice-California, Interfaith Worker Justice and the New York Sanctuary Coalition, are asking each participating church, synagogue and mosque to provide refuge for one or more illegal immigrants.

To be eligible, an undocumented immigrant must be in deportation proceedings, have a good work record and have children who are U.S. citizens by birth. They must also agree to undergo training to overcome their fear of public exposure and articulate their cases at news conferences and public gatherings.

Church officials, citing immigration raids across the country that are breaking up families, say immigration law needs to be more humane. With Congress poised to restart debate on legislative reforms, they hope the sanctuary movement will focus attention on the issue.

"We'd like these families to represent the 12 million undocumented people in the United

States," said the Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, executive director of Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice-California and a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

"We're choosing them for their personal stories," she said, "but we're training them in how to respond to questions about their plights."

Salvatierra said the movement is a political protest against immigration policies as well as a religious obligation recognized in biblical passages such as Leviticus 19:34: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Although it has no legal standing in the United States, sanctuary as a sacred right of a church is a widely held notion. Those who believe in it think that federal officers are less likely to arrest an undocumented family in a church than in a home or workplace.

To attract as much media attention as possible, the new sanctuary movement will be unveiled in simultaneous news conferences in Los Angeles and New York City.

"The churches in these cities will serve as models for others to emulate," said immigration attorney Peter A. Schey, president of the board of directors of the Center for Human Rights & Constitutional Law Foundation. "The long-term goal would be to have as many faith-based organizations as possible helping as many immigrant families as possible."

But critics such as Lupe Moreno said the sanctuary movement is misguided.

"They talk about preserving family unity, but illegal immigrants leave wives, husbands and children in Mexico all the time — and sometimes never see them again," said Moreno, spokeswoman for Latino Americans for Immigration Reform. "I've met lots of people who remember being abandoned by parents who left them behind in Mexico."

Sanctuary leaders acknowledged that it hasn't been easy persuading churches to declare themselves sanctuaries. The policy of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which includes a number of priests who belong to organizations supporting the sanctuary movement, is to allow individual parishes to decide whether to participate.

Some church leaders still talk about how the federal government in 1985 began to indict sanctuary workers in Tucson and Seattle for concealing and assisting illegal immigrants.

In an effort to avoid legal confrontations, immigration attorneys are advising participants in the new sanctuary movement not to hide the identity of the illegal immigrants in their care.

"The congregation is not breaking any laws as long as the family is public and they are in the legal process," Salvatierra said.

Some churches are not convinced.

"We're considering joining the sanctuary movement," said Father Richard Zanotti of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, a parish of 4,000 congregants in Sun Valley. "Our concern is over what we will have to commit to provide for any family we accept."

"We don't want to put a family in an uncomfortable situation — that goes for our congregants as well," he said. "But there's always some risk of a glitch in an immigration office or of someone coming out to bring us to court."

A new legal strategy and an emphasis on keeping undocumented families united are not the only things that set the new sanctuary movement apart from one in the 1980s organized to aid thousands of Central Americans fleeing civil wars.

"The new movement recognizes that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. today are a diverse group," Schey said, "and they came here seeking familial reunification or were drawn by the demand for labor."

The sparks that ignited the new movement were immigration raids in recent months that resulted in undocumented parents being separated from their U.S.-born children, or entire families being held in detention in prison-like settings.

In Southern California, church leaders and illegal immigrant workers facing deportation began meeting after work in religious centers such as the Episcopal Cathedral Center of St. Paul in Echo Park to discuss what they could do. The often-emotional sessions were conducted around a single lighted candle and ended with prayers and singing.

It all brings back painful memories for Estrada, who 22 years ago helped organize an effort to house dozens of undocumented political refugees from Central America in Our Lady Queen of Angels, which has a long history of social activism.

"We had about 100 people sleeping and eating in the church basement," he recalled. "That was unacceptable. We're not going to do it like that this time."

Instead, "we're building a little living quarters in our church at a cost of about \$1,000," he said. "It's not much money, but it will help us get our message out: We have to stop the raids."

*

louis.sahagun@latimes.com