

SANCTUARY FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES

A Case Study

The Rev. Dr. Richard Bradley was deeply concerned that Monday morning as he considered the options for his next sermon. Some weeks earlier he had decided that he must deal with the sanctuary issue, and he had chosen this coming Sunday to speak about it in his sermon. Now he must decide how to prepare the sermon so that the biblical challenge would not only be proclaimed but also heard and received, so that the spiritual and theological dimensions of this issue would emerge above the political and ideological dimensions, so that the congregation and its leaders would perceive and pursue the call to faithfulness through the potential maze of controversy and dissention.

First Church was nationally known as a progressive church, but Bradley had discovered that neither the members nor the leaders were equipped to deal theologically with this issue. He had been their Senior Pastor just 18 months, but he had taken care to establish his roots and gain their trust as teacher, pastor, and administrator as well as preacher. He knew very well that many of his prosperous and professional members would be inclined to oppose any support for the sanctuary movement, but a few were already deeply involved and others were sympathetic. Now it was time for him to exercise the theological-spiritual leadership for which they had called him.

CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES

At its last four national assemblies the denomination had produced strong resolutions against our country's policies toward Central America, identifying our support for the repressive regimes of Guatemala and El Salvador as a major factor in the widespread death and suffering there, causing the flood of refugees to this country. It had also exhorted local churches to provide sanctuary and aid to the refugees. A major document containing historical background, Bible study, and recommendations had been sent to all the churches, and an adult class at First Church had taken up this study for six weeks with great interest.

Some of the concerned members became very active in the mission committee, looking for ways to present the challenge of Central America to the whole

congregation. Then one of the members of this group was invited to go to Guatemala with a delegation of North American church and human rights leaders to stand beside the families of "the disappeared" during a public demonstration because their lives were in grave danger. She brought back a shocking and moving report of the violence in Guatemala and linked those stories with the reports of the refugees who arrive every day in the region where First Church is located.

The mission committee recommended that the church board undertake another study of the crisis in Central America and sanctuary for refugees. The board agreed to sponsor a series of three extended sessions open to the whole congregation. Many voices and viewpoints were heard or read: a Salvadoran refugee, a refugee lawyer, former missionaries to Central America, a U.S. medical doctor who had witnessed government atrocities in El Salvador, an observer at the Nicaraguan elections, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the pastor of a sanctuary church, Latin American church leaders, etc.

At the end of this process the participants made a list of recommendations for further study and action. They knew it would not be realistic to ask the church board to consider a motion to become a sanctuary church, but they did ask that a letter of support be sent to the sanctuary workers on trial in Tucson. Even this aroused strong feelings of opposition among some members of the board, but it did pass.

ARGUMENTS FOR SANCTUARY

There are many ways to explain why churches are declaring sanctuary, but the movement began in response to direct and urgent needs of refugees whose lives had been threatened in their own countries. Churches in border states exhausted the economic and legal means at their disposal and found that they could not stop the deportations. Hundreds of Central Americans were being deported each month. Only then did these churches turn to the ancient tradition of declaring publicly that they would provide sanctuary for these refugees in defiance of the federal government. Among their reasons are the following:

1. The central teachings of the Old and New Testaments call us to love our neighbors (Lev. 19:18, Mk. 12:31), and many passages call for special

compassion for the poor, widows and orphans, and aliens (Lev. 19:33-34), because they are the most vulnerable.

2. Response to the hungry, naked, alien, and imprisoned is not a secondary matter but fundamental. To reject them is to reject Christ himself (Mt. 25:31-46). It is impossible to love God and not love one's brothers and sisters (I Jn. 4:20-21). The sanctuary churches believe that this requires them to protect the refugees, even if they must resist the Immigration and Naturalization Service.
3. Central Americans are members of Christ's body. Their pain and suffering are felt by U.S. Christians. Those refugees who go into sanctuary agree to share their testimony, to be a voice for the voiceless in Central America, to inform/to educate/to evangelize U.S. brothers and sisters out of their pain. Sanctuary churches stand in solidarity with them and try to respond to their needs.
4. Sanctuary advocates insist that these Central Americans are refugees as defined by the U.S. Refugee Act (1980), the UN Protocol on Refugees (1967), and the Geneva Convention (1949). The United Nations has specifically designated Salvadorans and Guatemalans as refugees, and the U.S. is the only signatory of the UN Protocol that refuses to grant them that status. INS statistics reveal that less than 3% of Salvadorans and 1% of Guatemalans who apply are granted political asylum. Therefore those who protect Central American refugees say they are upholding national and international law and making a stand for justice. According to them, the U.S. government is violating the law, and its prosecution of sanctuary workers is a direct violation of the Geneva Convention.
5. The sanctuary movement has become a call to national responsibility. Refugees are given opportunities to tell their stories in order not only to stop the deportations but also to stop U.S. aid to repression in their own countries. Their stories of government-sponsored terror and killing are so graphic that more and more citizens are calling on our government to stop its intervention in Central America.
6. While they affirm that they stand within the law and that U.S. refugee

laws are good, the sanctuary workers risk imprisonment and fines under the present application of those laws. They are willing to oppose the federal authorities of this country in obedience to divine authority, recalling that in the past many Christians resisted government authority to protect runaway slaves, European Jews, and persecuted Japanese Americans in this country.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST SANCTUARY

Church people are law-abiding citizens; they generally have great difficulty dealing with any movement that breaks the law or opposes government authority. They naturally assume that our laws are good or that if they are not adequate they can be changed through political action. Many are initially inclined to believe the government's interpretation of the Central American refugee problem and the sanctuary movement.

1. The government says there is no basis for sanctuary in U.S. law and no need for it because we offer the most humane and generous treatment of refugees among all the nations of the world. Central Americans who fear persecution may apply to the INS for political asylum, and if denied they may appeal to various levels of courts.
2. The government makes a distinction between political refugees and economic migrants. They say only the former should be admitted, otherwise half the population of Central America would leave poverty and unrest there in order to seek a better life here. Central Americans have been coming to the U.S. for economic reasons for a long time.
3. The U.S. government claims to be working toward the democratization of Guatemala and El Salvador, while supporting those governments against Marxist insurgencies. Human rights abuses have been bad but they are decreasing. Press reports indicate that in El Salvador civilian deaths from rightwing death squads have dropped considerably from the 9000 registered in 1980.
4. The government says there is no indication that deportees are persecuted or killed. There is even a program in El Salvador to meet them, help

them return to their families and villages, and keep in touch with them for six months.

5. The government accuses the sanctuary movement of using refugees for political ends, i.e. to oppose U.S. foreign policy in Central America. This is not really helping the refugees, they say. In fact, it puts them outside the laws which were meant to protect them.
6. The government will continue to prosecute violators of U.S. immigration law, even if their motivation is religious or humanitarian. The INS is charged with the enforcement of statutes that make unlawful smuggling, transporting, or harboring of illegal aliens felonies punishable by incarceration for up to five years each. Religious motivation is no excuse for breaking these or any other laws.

THE SERMON

After reviewing the situation in his church and the arguments for and against sanctuary, Mr. Bradley had to decide what he would say in next Sunday's sermon. He was now convinced, because of the testimony of missionaries, refugees, and church leaders in this country and Latin America, that our government is gravely distorting the facts and realities about Central America and the plight of the refugees, but most of his members had not yet come to that conclusion. A growing number of his members were becoming deeply concerned. Others were perplexed. Most would rather not be disturbed by such a controversial, political matter, especially not in the Sunday sermon. What should he do?

F. Ross Kinsler
May 1, 1986

SANCTUARY FOR CENTRAL AMERICANS

Teaching Note

The crisis in Central America has been brought home to many U.S. churches and other groups through the simple but powerful testimony of unsophisticated refugees. The sanctuary movement not only provides protection for refugees; it also gives them opportunities to tell their stories. This case study opens up some of the aspects of the sanctuary issue as it is experienced in a prosperous, mainline church: the biblical mandate to care for aliens; church-state confrontation; education for social justice; the pastoral and prophetic ministry of a pastor; the Christian's responsibility vis-a-vis the law, justice, and foreign policy; conflicting reports of what is happening and conflicting interpretations of the law.

This case can be used to pursue various objectives:

1. To build a biblical-theological foundation for ministry with refugees and other marginalized people.
2. To weigh the arguments for and against churches' declaring sanctuary.
3. To explore the relationships between prophetic, educational, and social ministries.
4. To identify the line between solidarity with the poor and obedience to the state.
5. To deepen consciousness of Christians' responsibility to the oppressed near and far away.

CASE PLAN

This case study can be presented in various ways in response to the specific nature of the group, time available, and objectives. Much depends on whether the

participants are expected to prepare themselves in advance. Some of the following steps may be useful.

1. If advanced preparation is possible, ask the participants to read the case, list arguments for and against churches declaring sanctuary, and take at least a tentative position before coming together.
2. If no advanced preparation is possible, read the case story to the group, divide the participants into groups, ask them to review and expand the list of pros and cons.
3. Ask each group to appoint someone to present the pros and another the cons; then form a panel in plenary session and hear all the pros, then the cons; allow time for rebuttals, then ask for opinions from the floor.
4. Using newsprint or chalkboard, ask the participants to outline alternative approaches for Mr. Bradley's sermon, which might emphasize the pastoral, educational, and prophetic dimensions of the sanctuary issue. An alternative would be to draw up an outline for a plan to help a congregation deal with the sanctuary issue.
5. Heighten the urgency of the churches' response to the crisis in Central America and the deportation of refugees by asking someone to read Archbishop Romero's letter of February 17, 1980 to President Carter asking him to prohibit all military assistance to El Salvador and Archbishop Rivera y Dama's letter of November 15, 1985 asking the US Congress to stop the deportation of Salvadoran refugees. (Other materials could be used.)
6. Distribute a page of key quotations on the legal and moral questions about the sanctuary issue which will stimulate discussion and challenge assumptions about the Christian's responsibility before the law.
7. Close the session by asking the participants what they have learned from the experience, how the case study could be improved, and/or what alternatives they suggest for dealing with the sanctuary issue.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

Books

Ignatius, Blau, This Ground is Holy: Church Sanctuary and Central American Refugees, New York: Paulist Press, 1985.

Renny Golden and Michael McConnell, Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986.

Gary MacEoin, ed., Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugees' Struggle, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

Articles

A. Bates Butler, III, "Legal Justification for the Sanctuary Movement: The Rest of the Story," mimeographed for distribution at the 1985 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Justo L. Gonzales, "Sanctuary: Some Historical, Legal, and Theological Considerations," Exodus, Spring 1985.

Ross and Gloria Kinsler, "Why Declare Sanctuary?" Christianity and Crisis, September 30, 1985.