



Photo by Robyn Braverman

The Sanctuary Movement

Churches and other groups make the passage easier.

BY JOSHUA HAMILL

"Do not oppress foreigners, for you know what it is like to be a foreigner; remember your own experience in the land of Egypt."

— Exodus 23:9

It was June of 1980 when the Salvadoran military began its destructive occupation of the University of El Salvador campus. Yet for Javier Castro, it marked just one in a series of events that would ultimately force him and his family to flee their homeland in search of refuge.

"I was there the very day when the army came in, taking classes. I could see the tanks coming in (from the main gate of the university) destroying everything that they could," Castro says.

"And the people that were in the buildings close to the gates, as soon as they were trying to leave they were immediately arrested. Other people were

running, and the soldiers started to persecute them. . . I could hear a lot of gunshots while I was leaving. . . I was lucky to make it out OK.

"Although I was attending the university, I also was involved with the labor union movement in El Salvador, beginning in 1973. Because I was a labor leader organizer, I suffered a lot of repression. . . several members of my family were killed, and my brother was put in jail. . . so I left the country," he says.

Along with his wife and young son, Castro arrived in Eugene in January 1984 after stopovers in Mexico City and Los Angeles. Here they have found shelter and support from the Eugene Friends Meeting, a participant in the nationwide, grass-roots effort known as the sanctuary movement.

Drawing upon biblical mandates to aid the stranger and those in need, the modern sanctuary movement has found its primary base in the religious community. Of the more than 400 publicly declared sanctuary sites in the United States at the present time, virtually all are either churches or congregations that draw upon the Judeo-Christian tradition of offering hospitality and hope to the injured and oppressed. This tradition has been extended primarily to refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala and, as such, has raised certain questions regarding U.S. foreign policy in those countries.

Yet for most of those involved in the movement, sanctuary is more a question of faith and conscience than politics.

According to Ellen Bondurant, a member of the sanctuary committee of Eugene's Central Presbyterian Church, her own congregation got involved after hearing firsthand accounts by the refugees themselves.

"We learned that the refugees had something to teach us. They had a story about the involvement of our government in Central America that many people in the church didn't know," Bondurant says.

While noting the impact of the realization that refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador were being deported by the U.S. government, she says the political aspect was secondary to "meeting the needs of suffering people." This led the church to declare public sanctuary in 1984, yet not without serious deliberation.

"There were many people who saw this as a simple case of breaking the law, and it was very difficult to explain all the intricacies of the needs and everything to people who were already convinced of that," she says of the decision-making process.

An underlying element in the sanctuary movement, however, has been the idea of civil initiative as opposed to civil disobedience, Bondurant says.

"We don't really see ourselves as

breaking the law because the law states that people with a well-founded fear of persecution should be able to reside here until they can safely return to their country. That is the law that the United States government is breaking, and we are merely taking the initiative to obey it," she says.

In addition to the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, which defines a refugee as "a person with a reasonable fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group," Bondurant cites the United Nations Geneva Conventions as those laws that she and others in the sanctuary movement seek to uphold.

"The Geneva Conventions say that any person may seek refuge in another country if they are running from a general state of war where they are in danger, whether it be bombing or whatever," she says.

"According to international law, the citizens of their country need to obey it, especially if their government is not obeying it," she adds.

Bondurant also notes the Nuremberg Principles that stem from the Nazi holocaust as a precedent, whereby the citizens of a country have a legal responsibility that goes beyond what their government says.

While most sanctuary workers share the view that they are upholding the law rather than breaking it, the move-

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