

Sanctuary program for immigrants

WASHINGTON - With immediate plans to shelter families in Los Angeles, New York and San Diego, an interfaith coalition calling itself the New Sanctuary Movement announced plans to try to protect families from deportation in churches and other faith-affiliated places around the country.

Following the example of the 1980s church-based network that sheltered Central American immigrants who sought refuge from civil wars at home, the New Sanctuary Movement hopes to enlist religious congregations around the country to publicly shelter people who are at risk of deportation. The organization is particularly focusing on “mixed-status” families, or those that include a combination of people who are in the country illegally and legal residents or U.S. citizens.

Among the initial steps announced by the organization May 9:

- Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church in Los Angeles will host a single father identified only as Jose, who has two preteen children who were born in the United States. Jose faces deportation to his native Mexico.
- Three Lutheran churches in Brooklyn will share hosting a Chinese couple and their two U.S. citizen toddlers. The couple, identified as Joe and Mei, failed in their attempt to obtain legal asylum in the United States, sought out of fear that they might face prison and involuntary sterilization under China’s family planning laws.
- In San Diego, a Quaker congregation has taken in Marco, a college graduate who came to the United States on a temporary visa as a 4-year-old with his family. He excelled academically and worked his way through college. Bad advice from an immigration attorney hired to pursue legalization for his family more than a decade ago left them facing deportation to Mexico.
- Three Manhattan Lutheran churches are sponsoring the family of a Haitian man who entered the United States legally in 1986, but now faces deportation due to a drug possession conviction in 1989. The man, identified only as Jean, has a wife and five children, including a newborn, who are all U.S. citizens. His deportation to Haiti would force the rest of the family to live in a country foreign to them, or struggle to

survive in New York without the help of the family breadwinner, according to sanctuary movement organizers.

“Our concern is the separation of families, the anguish and suffering they endure under the current law that doesn’t have a heart,” said Father Juan Carlos Ruiz in a May 8 phone interview with Catholic News Service.

Father Ruiz, a New Jersey priest who is founding director of Asociacion Tepeyac, an immigrant community services agency in the Bronx borough of New York City, said the situations of families like those being sheltered illustrate that “the law needs to adapt to the demands of justice.”

He said the immigration problem in the United States is “not just a political or social phenomena, but a spiritual and moral one. We are speaking from our prophetic roots.”

Father Ruiz said 15 congregations in New York have committed to sponsoring families in sanctuary. Press conferences announcing the launch of the New Sanctuary Movement were held in New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago and Seattle.

“Sanctuary goes back to the basic definition of community,” said Father Ruiz, “offering a place where people can be safe and respected.”

Since April 2006, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, a division of the Department of Homeland Security, has dramatically stepped up its enforcement of deportation orders. Currently 52 teams of agents are tracking down immigrant fugitives or “absconders,” who have orders of deportation. A year ago, 35 teams were doing that work.

By the end of fiscal 2006, total deportations, including voluntary departures and other categories, were up to 186,000, over the previous year’s total of 132,000.

A Chicago Methodist parish has been hosting Elvira Arrellano in its church since August. She has a pending order of deportation but she has said she is unwilling to bring her 8-year-old U.S. son to live in Mexico, a country he doesn’t know.

Arellano said she decided to seek sanctuary in the church as an act of civil disobedience. ICE agents had made no move to arrest her at the church as of May 10.

Father Ruiz said the Catholic hierarchy in New York has neither publicly supported nor opposed the New Sanctuary Movement.

Tod Tamberg, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, said Cardinal Roger M. Mahony is leaving it up to individual pastors to decide whether to participate in the project.

The Web site for the organization, www.newsanctuarymovement.org, features on its main page a reference to Cardinal Mahony's announcement in 2006 that he would instruct his priests and employees to disregard sections of a then-pending immigration bill if it were to pass. The bill, which passed the House but could not be reconciled with a vastly different Senate bill, included a provision to make it a felony to provide aid to illegal immigrants, including humanitarian or economic assistance.