

Local News

Sanctuary leaders focus on resettlement efforts

By Lee Strong

In 1984, the Rochester Sanctuary Movement leaped into the headlines when several local congregations committed themselves to sheltering illegal aliens from the war-torn country of El Salvador. The movement remained in the news as more congregations and groups declared themselves sanctuaries, or pledged support for the movement. And the wave of momentum crested when Rochester's City Council declared Rochester "a city of sanctuaries."

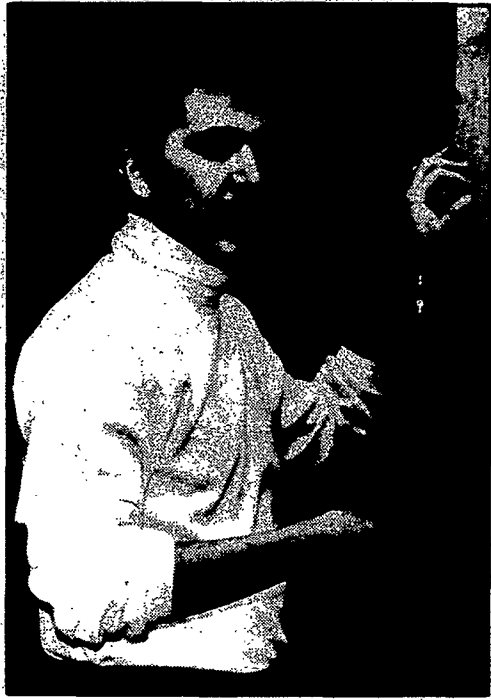
Public awareness of the movement reached its height while Alejandro Gomez and his family lived in sanctuary provided by two sanctuary congregations — Corpus Christi Church and Downtown Presbyterian Church — and while Gomez contended with U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service attempts to deport the family to their native El Salvador.

Since the Gomez family fled to Canada in July, 1986, little has been heard from the local sanctuary movement. Recent and upcoming events, however, reveal that the movement is very much alive in Rochester.

On January 4, the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester declared their support of sanctuary, pledging to provide financial support, to work for legislative change and even to send available sisters to El Salvador to help with resettlement efforts there.

Approximately 30 sanctuary leaders from Rochester, Syracuse, Ithaca and Buffalo met at Colgate Rochester Divinity School on January 23 to discuss new directions the movement is taking and to learn about current conditions in El Salvador. This weekend, Kathleen Kenney of the Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research and Education (SHARE) Foundation — a Washington-based group supporting resettlement efforts in El Salvador and working toward changes in U.S. policies toward that nation — will speak to Corpus Christi parishioners, who are moving toward a decision on becoming a sister parish to a Salvadoran faith community.

Meanwhile, the Rochester Sanctuary Committee is planning an auction for Saturday, March 5, at Temple B'Rith Kodesh — one of Rochester's seven sanctuary congregations — to raise funds for refugee-resettlement efforts



Oscar Chacon

in El Salvador.

According to leaders of the local sanctuary movement, the evolution of Rochester's sanctuary efforts parallels a national trend away from immediate humanitarian concern for Salvadoran refugees in the United States and toward a broader concern for Salvadoran refugees everywhere. Rochester Sanctuary Steering Committee member Marilyn Mould noted, however, that the movement's "overall goal has always been that people could live in (El Salvador) peacefully."

This shift in focus comes in response to several factors, noted Sister Kathleen Weider, SSJ, assistant chaplain at Nazareth College. Sister Weider, who has visited refugee settlements in Honduras and El Salvador, explained that the situations in the United States and El Salvador have changed considerably since the movement began.

"Fewer people are coming through seeking sanctuary," she observed, adding that the climate for refugees has tightened up in this coun-

try. Many of the refugees coming to the United States are simply passing through to Canada. Rather than seeking long-term shelter, these refugees frequently require transportation and help with food and clothing.

Recent tightening of immigration laws in Canada, however, has forced the movement to assist refugees held up on the American side of the border waiting for permission to cross. The sanctuary groups in such cities as Buffalo and Plattsburgh have struggled to feed and house these refugees while they wait — and such groups as Rochester's have been supplying financial and material support.

A more important reason for the shift is the refugees' desire to return to El Salvador, Sister Weider said. One of the new focuses of the sanctuary movement has been supporting the refugees in these efforts, particularly through the Going Home Campaign; a SHARE Foundation project that provides financial and material support for resettlement efforts, and sends volunteers to travel with the returning refugees in a process called "accompaniment."

In October, Sister Weider accompanied a group of refugees moving from the Mesa Grande Refugee Camp in Honduras back to El Salvador. Returning refugees, she noted, are harassed by Salvadoran government forces who fear the refugees will help the guerillas — or that they are guerillas themselves. In addition to attacks by the army, the returning groups frequently find their food and medical supplies cut off.

The presence of Americans makes attacks on returning groups less likely, because "killing an American would be bad publicity," Mould noted. In addition, troops are less likely to harass refugees while Americans are in the camps. The Salvadorans return to their homes despite the dangers, Mould said, because conditions in the Honduran refugee camps have deteriorated since the United Nations relinquished control of the camps to the Honduran government, and because the Salvadorans believe El Salvador "will have a better chance to get back to normal with them there."

The Sister Parish Plan — an outgrowth of the Going Home Campaign — is one attempt to provide support for the newly created resettled communities in El Salvador. The plan calls for parishes and church groups in the United States to establish bonds with communities in El Salvador. The North American parishes send delegations to their sister parishes on a regular basis to study conditions there and to learn what the people need. The delegations report back to their home parishes, which then attempt to fill the needs of the Salvadoran communities. This aid might include money or

such specific items as medical or agricultural equipment.

More important than the material aid is the person-to-person contact, noted SHARE's Kathleen Kenney. This contact enables Americans to attach names and faces to the churches in El Salvador they are supporting. Through personal contact, the Americans are also "enriched by the deep faith of the people in El Salvador," she said.

In addition to fostering sister parishes, SHARE arranges for groups traveling to El Salvador to deliver supplies and contributions. If efforts are successful, a delegation going to El Salvador March 12 will carry with them the proceeds of the Rochester Sanctuary Committee's March 5 auction.

The need for funds to assist with resettlement efforts and other sanctuary activities is something sanctuary leaders realized more clearly as a result of the January 23 retreat at the Divinity School. The retreat was designed to discuss resettlement efforts, current activities of local sanctuary groups and conditions in El Salvador. During the event, area sanctuary leaders reported the status of the sanctuary movement in their respective cities, viewed slides from Honduras and El Salvador, and listened to a talk given by Oscar Chacon, a Salvadoran who works with Boston's Interfaith Office on Accompaniment.

Chacon, who visited El Salvador in March and December of 1987, told the assembly that conditions in El Salvador are growing worse. The army is unable to defeat guerilla forces, popular dissent against the current government is growing, and the death squads are once again in action. Yet, "people would not be returning and we wouldn't have a repopulation movement if the situation was hopeless," he noted.

For repopulation to succeed, Salvadorans will need help from the U.S. sanctuary movement, because Salvadoran people believe that "nothing goes on in El Salvador without the consent or approval of the United States," Chacon said. They need to see U.S. support for their activities to encourage them to continue.

In assessing the retreat, Sister Weider noted that the gathering was important for the local sanctuary movement because it gave the members "a chance to reflect on where we are, and to get a sense of new directions."

Basically, she concluded, the retreat reinforced the continuing need for the movement to respond "to much broader needs than the more immediate need of shelter." The new directions discussed at the retreat, she added, are simply responses "to (the Salvadorans own) requests and needs."

It's a boy!!



Bonnie Trafalet/Courier-Journal

The Courier-Journal staff wishes to congratulate associate editor Teresa A. Parsons and her husband, Jim Parsons of WROC-TV8, on the birth of their first child, Joseph. The handsome baby was born early Saturday morning, Jan. 16, 1988. Here's to the happy family!

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