



Churches Engage in Illegal Immigrant Sanctuary Movement

Twenty-four churches and synagogues in Phoenix, Tucson, Chicago, and Portland have offered sanctuary to illegal immigrants and another 52 faith communities have pledged their support of the movement.

The resurgence of this sanctuary movement was announced publicly on September 24, when Rev. Noel Andersen, grassroots coordinator for immigrants' rights with Church World Service (CWS), spoke with members of the press.



"The growth and momentum of sanctuary across the country is a result of congregations and immigrant communities working together to confront these broken human-made laws. We have a higher calling," said Andersen.

MSNBC reported that some church leaders have decided to take advantage of federal policies that bar immigration agents from entering places of worship to carry out final deportation orders on illegal immigrants. The report noted that some churches have allowed entire families to seek refuge in their buildings.

"Opening the doors of a church or a synagogue or a mosque and declaring sanctuary is a very serious matter," Andersen said. "Faith leaders and their congregants do not enter into this decision lightly."

A *Wall Street Journal* report noted that U.S. law doesn't prohibit law enforcement from entering places of worship, but church groups have said they are confident that won't occur.

One such illegal immigrant taking advantage of this type of sanctuary is Rosa Robles Loreta, who has lived with her husband and two sons inside Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, since August 7.

"My struggle goes further than from my immediate family, and it is a call and a national petition so that others can also have hope and establish their lives here, where we have already lived for so long," Robles Loreta told MSNBC.

A message posted on the website of Southside Presbyterian Church reads: "We must act now to stop the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) from ripping Rosa Robles Loreta away from her family and community."

That statement suggests that only Robles Loreta is facing deportation — not her husband and sons.

Letters from Southside Presbyterian's pastor, Alison Harrington, and from Robles Loreta posted on the website, indicate that the church intends to make a cause célèbre out of her case in order to publicize the sanctuary movement it helped start. The website also features a four-part action agenda that includes:

1. Liking the Rosa Robles Loreta Sanctuary Facebook page.



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2. Signing the “Groundswell Petition,” or faxing or emailing Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson.

3. Phoning Secretary Johnson or President Obama and Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council Cecilia Muñoz, making “two calls every day,” to fill up Johnson’s voicemail with the message: “Hello, my name is _____. I am calling to urge Secretary to Johnson to use the discretion available to him to stop the deportation of Mrs. Rosa Robles Loreto...”

Calling President Obama and Cecilia Muñoz, Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, to state the same message in person.

4. Having other congregations or organizations create a sign-on letter for their members to urge Johnson, Obama, and Muñoz to close Robles Loreto’s case so she will not be deported.

MSNBC reported that the original Sanctuary Movement was established at Southside Presbyterian in the early 1980s when thousands of Central Americans fled to the United States and entered our country illegally. The church rekindled the movement this summer by providing sanctuary to Daniel Neyoy, a Tucson man facing deportation.

Federal officials did not take kindly to the church’s illegal activities, however. In 1984, Southside Presbyterian’s pastor at the time, Rev. John Fife, and seven others were convicted of breaking federal immigration laws and served five years’ probation.

“While Arizona has been known as the birth place of anti-immigrant legislation and sentiments, the actions of these congregations are changing that narrative and now Arizona is becoming known as the birth place of a faith-based moment of solidarity and hospitality that we call Sanctuary,” MSNBC quoted Harrington as saying.

Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), who has criticized the Obama administration’s anemic record on deportations — not for being ineffective, but for being too excessive — said the sanctuary effort was necessary given inaction in Washington.

“The sanctuary movement is a response to the lack of action. It is a response to the humanity of the issue,” Grijalva told reporters. “And I think it is going to be a cornerstone in pushing the decency of the American people to demand of its elected officials to do something.”

Rev. Noel Andersen, whose statement to the national media helped publicize the resurgence of the sanctuary movement, has a history as an “immigrants’ rights” activist. While he was serving as assistant pastor at the Good Shepherd United Church of Christ in Sahuarita, Arizona, notes his biography, “the congregation was very active in humanitarian aid for migrants on the border and in the struggle against anti-immigrant bill SB 1070.”

While few will fault a pastor from engaging in humanitarian aid, Andersen’s labeling of SB 1070 as “anti-immigrant” provides a clear indication of his position on enforcing our nation’s immigration laws.

SB 1070, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer on April 23, 2010, made it a state misdemeanor crime for an alien to be in Arizona without carrying the required documents, and required that state law enforcement officers attempt to determine an individual’s immigration status during a “lawful stop, detention or arrest,” when there is reasonable suspicion that the individual is an illegal immigrant. The Supreme Court subsequently upheld the provision requiring immigration status checks during law enforcement stops, but struck down three other provisions as violations of the Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution.



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While SB 1070 was definitely anti-*illegal* immigrant, only someone who has little regard for our immigration laws would label it as “anti-immigrant.”

In an article posted on the CWS website, Andersen also relates how he was invited by the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance to go to the state and “help galvanize CWS member denominations in the organizing efforts against HB 488.” As with SB 1070, Andersen describes HB 488 as another “anti-immigrant bill.” The two bills were very similar in their purpose, but the Mississippi bill died in committee.

Not content to criticize the bill on its content alone, Andersen revealed more about himself by faulting the bill for having been supported by Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, whose campaign had been backed by the Tea Party and the Mississippi Federation for Immigration Reform and Enforcement (M-FIRE). Andersen attempted to castigate this “anti-immigrant” bill further by implying it was racist, stating that M-FIRE was founded by FAIR, which “was classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2007.”

As has been noted many times by *The New American*, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is an extremist anti-Christian hate group best known for its unfounded smears of any organization that defends strict adherence to the Constitution and traditional moral values. Civil rights attorney and Southern Center for Human Rights President Stephen Bright, citing investigations and even a federal judge, lambasted SPLC founder Morris Dees as a “con man and fraud” who takes advantage of “naive, well-meaning people” for his own benefit.

Christian churches always have, and always will, follow their mandate to practice the works of mercy that Jesus described in Bible passages. But harboring fugitives from just laws passed to protect the well-being of all citizens is not merciful; it is criminal.

Photo of Francisco Aguirre, originally from El Salvador, taking refuge in an Oregon church to avoid deportation: AP Images

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