

Tucson Region

'80s sanctuary leader calls for new local role

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Rev. John Fife, a sanctuary pioneer

No local churches have officially joined a new national sanctuary movement to shelter illegal entrants, but the leader of a similar movement that started in Tucson in the 1980s says the religious community needs to consider it.

"Nursing moms are being deported, people are being picked up on the street and immediate family members are disappearing (back to their countries). The church needs to stand up and say this is a gross violation of human rights," said the Rev. John Fife, retired pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church.

In 1986, Fife was one of eight people — including a Catholic priest and a nun — convicted for their involvement with the Sanctuary Movement, which he co-founded. The movement illegally brought Central Americans into the United States. Supporters of the movement said the refugees faced persecution and death squads in their home countries, while critics said many were just seeking jobs.

"The integrity of family is essential to all of us and to our communities and churches," Fife said. "The inability of Congress and the president to arrive at a workable solution to the set of immigration questions we've faced for too long means the church has to provide not only a witness in terms of words, but needs to act."

For now, no Tucson churches have officially joined a new national effort to protect illegal entrants from deportation by offering their buildings as a sanctuary. Religious leaders across the nation are pressuring Congress to reform the nation's immigration laws.

So far churches in five major cities — Los Angeles, San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and New York — plan to assist illegal entrants with court proceedings, as well as prepare to house them in churches if authorities attempt to deport them.

Fife says the new effort, whose leaders include the Interfaith Workers Alliance, will focus on two areas — immediate family members of U.S. citizens who are at risk of deportation, and maintaining basic human rights of people to seek work and feed their families.

"Part of the idea is to move day-labor centers onto church property so that they can safely organize themselves to seek work and be free from raids and harassment by vigilantes and ICE," Fife said.

Initially, organizers decided that faith communities in Tucson ought to focus on the more immediate needs of illegal entrants in Southern Arizona, where illegal entrants who cross the desert into Arizona by foot from Mexico continue to die. Also, Fife said the most immediate needs for sanctuary are in major metropolitan areas.

"But that doesn't mean Tucson shouldn't be part of this. I hope this new movement produces serious conversations in churches, synagogues and mosques in Tucson and around the country," he said.

Critics say the faith groups are being charitable with someone else's resources — enabling illegal entrants to take someone else's job and filling up the classroom of someone else's child. They also say the laws are meant to protect citizens and must be followed.

ICE spokeswoman Lauren Mack did not say whether agents would arrest illegal entrants seeking shelter in a church. She did say agents have a duty to enforce immigration laws and ensure that people who willfully violate those laws face the consequences of their actions.

The Rev. David Wilkinson, senior pastor at St. Francis in the Foothills United Methodist Church, said local churches need to be talking about their responsibility to correct violations of human rights.

"Martin Luther King Jr. said that when a law is unjust, there is an obligation to break it," he said. "Every church needs to struggle with this issue. It's imperative. Our laws are contrary to what our faith teaches us. You are to provide hospitality to the sojourner and embrace those in trouble."

Though their group won't be directly involved in the new Sanctuary Movement, members of faith-based No More Deaths, which provides food, water and medical assistance to illegal entrants in distress along the border, are supportive.

"We support any community effort to protect human rights," spokesman Walt Staton said.

On Wednesday a Catholic church in Los Angeles and a Lutheran church in North Hollywood each sheltered one person, and churches in other cities plan to do so in coming months.

Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas did not return phone calls seeking comment.

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