



**The Blood Stops Here:
Democratic Citizenship, Faith Communities, and the Question
of Human Rights in Detroit's Sanctuary Movement**

Mary E. Walle

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Advised by Professor Regina Morantz-Sanchez

*For the men I know at Gus Harrison Correctional Facility
- whose voices are silenced -
I hear you.*

*“The essential difference in my case was that I wouldn’t shut up...
But there are so many people who have been quieted.
Those of us who can speak out have a responsibility to do so.”
~ Jack Elder, Sanctuary worker*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Figures	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Set the Barn on Fire and Lock the Door	12
Chapter Two: Detroit Is My Hometown	30
Chapter Three: These Are My Brothers and Sisters	53
Conclusion	70
Bibliography	74

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Raul and Ernesto Gonzalez next to the “Freedom Train” van.....	47
Figure 2: The Gonzalez family next to the “Freedom Train” van.....	47
Figure 3: The ‘Freedom Train’ van.....	47
Figure 4: The Gonzalez family being interviewed on their way into Detroit via “The Freedom Train”.....	48
Figure 5: Parishioners and Sanctuary Supporters gather on the steps of St. Rita’s.....	48
Figure 6: Father John Nowlan celebrates mass at St. Rita’s after the Gonzalez family arrives.....	49
Figure 7: A group of religious sisters, Sanctuary Supporters, raise their hands during mass at St. Rita’s.....	49
Figure 8: Singers accompany mass at St. Rita’s.....	49
Figure 9: Raul Gonzalez playing guitar.....	50
Figure 10: Ernesto and Liliana Gonzalez.....	50
Figure 11: Valeria Gonzalez with her son Ernesto.....	51
Figure 12: Ernesto Gonzalez after arriving at St. Rita’s Parish.....	51
Figure 13: The Gonzalez family inside St. Rita’s.....	52
Figure 14: The Gonzalez family with Sanctuary Supporters.....	52

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INTRODUCTION

While driving through the Detroit suburb of Birmingham, Michigan, Phyllis Livermore saw something irregular. A group of people had planted themselves in a parking lot at Adams and Maple, holding up signs that condemned United States involvement in Central American countries. Astonished to see such claims being made in her city, Phyllis turned around to get a better look. She pulled into the parking lot and went up to a woman dressed in a bright pink shirt, asking who these people were and how to get involved. When Phyllis drove away the woman never expected to see her again, but Phyllis showed up to the next meeting and every one thereafter. That day - those signs, that group, and that woman - set her on a course that changed her life.

Living in Birmingham, Phyllis Livermore benefitted from economic changes and federal policies that by the 1980s had transformed the Metro-Detroit landscape from a booming industrial city to the epitome of the “city in crisis” over the course of the twentieth century.¹ The growth of *suburban* Detroit, with its white-majority composition, complimented the decline of the central city and adjacent communities within the city limits, which became increasingly impoverished communities of color. That day in the parking lot, Phyllis joined a relatively homogeneous group of middle-class, white activists who comprised the core of the Central American Solidarity Community in the Metro-Detroit area. Motivated by religious values, American ideals, and a commitment to human rights across borders, activists joined this “Sanctuary Movement” to challenge Reagan Administration policies in Central America. Willing to break U.S. law, they committed themselves to housing and supporting Central Americans who fled repressive, violent dictatorships in their own countries. This group of native Detroiters, who were also aware of the racial and economic injustices within their own city, chose to work in

¹ Thomas J. Sugrue *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

solidarity with Central Americans fighting for self-determination and human rights. But, were the injustices at home not as bad? Or simply not as easy to see?

Detroit: The Convergence of a Central American and Urban Crisis

In the 1970s throughout Central America, religious and leftist movements combined to agitate for egalitarian reforms in their deeply divided and profoundly unequal countries. The resulting wars between right-wing government backed military and paramilitary forces, known as “death squads” and coalitions of left-wing guerillas, were so heinous that no community escaped the consequences. Consumed by warfare by the early 1980s, Central America experienced unprecedented levels of violence, with many fleeing to the United States and elsewhere. The region’s right wing governments, friendly to the United States, were backed by the Reagan administration. As Central America became a battleground in the Cold War, American foreign policy makers determined that no government in the region would be lost to “communism.” For many Americans and citizens in of Western Europe, however, the brutal repression perpetrated in the name of dictators’ regimes quickly became a crisis of human rights. Central Americans too saw themselves fighting for equality and democracy in societies marked by pervasive injustice that could not be ignored.²

While a human rights crisis raged in Central America, the city of Detroit suffered from increasingly severe economic and population decline, directly linked to the effects of deindustrialization and systemic racialized housing discrimination that accompanied

² For an overview of Latin American history see John Charles Chasteen. *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York City: Norton Press, 2001). For a history of United State Policy in Latin America see Schoultz, Lars. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). See also, Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, The President, and Central America 1976-1993* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) and Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

suburbanization in the postwar era. Though popular historical memory and journalistic coverage most often marks the 1967 Riot as the beginning of Detroit's "urban crisis," historian Thomas Sugrue makes an incontrovertible case for examining the structural economic transformations and systematic discriminatory practices in housing and employment as the key causes of the crisis. He argues that the violence of Detroit's 1967 Riot must be understood as part a nation-wide urban unrest, mounted in fits and starts by a growing underclass whose livelihood was blighted by the results of post war government policies like the GI Bill, which enabled "upwardly mobile," primarily white working class citizens to purchase homes in the expanding suburbs. Those remaining in the city, deliberately left-out and forgotten, Sugrue notes, would eventually demand redress, in such angered acts of desperation as the Detroit 1967 Riot.³ Scholars Heather Thompson and Todd C. Shaw are among several recent experts who have built on Sugrue's work, identifying individual and group actors who participated in, and intervened to allay Detroit's unrest and arrest the city's gradual decline. Recuperating the stories of complex efforts made by residents, unionists, politicians, and activists who hoped to improve their city has been crucial to understanding Detroit's history in this period.⁴

³ Historians argue as to whether the events in July of 1967 in Detroit were a rebellion or riot. I fault to Sugrue's naming as the 1967 Detroit Riot, see Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

⁴ Heather Ann Thompson *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). For a commentary and analysis of Detroit based black activism around affordable housing see Todd C. Shaw *Now Is the Time!: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). See also Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: The Untold Story of Racial Inequality in America* (New York: WW Norton, 2005). These important analyses have remained confined to a primarily black and white analysis of Detroit's history. Recent scholarship has begun to recuperate the histories of other ethnic and racial communities, for example see Patricia Zavella *I'm Neither Here nor There: Mexicans' Quotidian Struggles with Migration and Poverty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

The Sanctuary Movement in the United States emerged over the course of the 1980s and lasted for about a decade. National leaders of the loosely constructed organization responded to increasing numbers of Central Americans flooding across the desert, scarred emotionally and physically by political repression and violence in their homelands. Originating at the U.S.-Mexican Border, the Sanctuary Movement—at its heart, a public declaration of support and provision of safe haven for those at risk—involved a significant number of churches and synagogues throughout the United States. The Central Americans who arrived fled torture, imprisonment, and death in their home countries.⁵

Detroit’s own vibrant and expanding Central American Solidarity Community converged with the National Sanctuary Movement. Seeds were planted and on December 15, 1983 St. Rita’s Parish became Michigan’s first public sanctuary for Central American refugees.⁶ The Gonzalez family, fleeing political persecution in El Salvador, came to live at St. Rita’s in July 1984, which we shall learn was a defining moment for the movement. During their five years at St. Rita’s, Raul and Valeria Gonzalez gave witness to their experiences in El Salvador, changing the lives and attitudes of many people in the Metro-Detroit area.⁷

⁵ When I reference the ‘Sanctuary Movement’ I mean the United States Sanctuary Movement during the 1980s. Other instances of using religious spaces as refuge have existed in different times and places throughout history. For a perspective on Sanctuary outside the American context see Randy K. Lippert, *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian Sanctuary Incidents, Power, and Law* (Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2005). Lippert seeks to correct the scholarly treatment of the sanctuary movement as a uniquely United States phenomenon during the 1980s by documenting incidents of sanctuary within Canada from 1983-2003.

⁶ Letter announcing St. Rita’s Declaration as a public sanctuary, 15 December 1983. Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder: Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.

⁷ Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 5 December 2012. “Sanctuary !! Freedom Train a Success” *A Voice of the Voiceless*, August 1984; University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30, Folder 2 “MICAH Newsletter...Voice of the Voiceless 1984.”

Phyllis Livermore, the Birmingham resident who, we learned, encountered a demonstration of activists while driving through Metro-Detroit and became one of them. The Salvadorans she would later meet gave the Central American “issue” faces, names, and a voice. She, and many others living in Metro-Detroit listened to Raul and Valeria closely. Their compelling stories solved one of the Central American Solidarity Community’s major challenges: getting people willing to become invested in an issue that seemed so far away, so disconnected from their own reality: one with its own economic and social concerns. Detroit Sanctuary responded by constructing a narrative that paired the economic decline and material suffering in the city of Detroit with that of Central America.⁸ As for Sanctuary workers, once people understood the links between the American government and the violent regimes in Central America, they felt responsible and would challenge their government to uphold the values it claimed to represent. Sanctuary workers continued to struggle with the tensions between local and international crises as they worked toward what they saw as a comprehensive understanding of their country’s responsibility as people of faith, individuals, one to another, and as moral human beings.

The Sanctuary Movement became the heart of Central American activism in Detroit. It played an important role in the lives of the nine sanctuary workers and supporters I interviewed. As native Detroiters, they worked from their city in solidarity with the people of Central America to put an end the grave injustices happening in a place far from their North American homes, yet close to their hearts, moral, and religious beliefs. Raul and Valeria Gonzalez, Salvadoran refugees, joined their efforts by living in

⁸ “Detroit Sanctuary” refers to the various organizations and people that formed the subset of a wider Detroit Central American Solidarity community who worked directly with or supported the Sanctuary family living at St. Rita’s Parish.

St. Rita's Church and speaking publicly about conditions in El Salvador as a part of the National United States Sanctuary Movement. Solidarity with Central Americans' fight for human rights and specifically working with Raul and Valeria helped many expand their understanding of human rights activism. They saw parallels in the plight of Detroit residents of color and the refugees from Central America, all of who needed jobs, affordable housing, and access to markets systematically closed off to them.

Historiography

The Sanctuary Movement in the United States has been the subject of research on both the local and the national level, the former concentrated primarily in an exploration of Sanctuary's roots on the United States border with Mexico, especially in Tucson and San Francisco. Journalists, such as Ann Crittendon and Robert Tomsho, have written about the National Movement.⁹ From a historian's perspective, their analyses are limited: written and published in the late 1980s during the activism of the Sanctuary Movement, they provide primary evidence more than historical analysis. Anthropological research has illuminated Sanctuary's development at the U.S.-Mexico Border where it began in both Tucson and the East Bay areas.¹⁰ Hilary Cunningham's argument that religion can play a role in social change and did so in the Sanctuary Movement is an important resource for my study.¹¹ In *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central American Peace Movement* Christian Smith analyzes the development and impact of three different but

⁹ Robert Tomsho. *The American Sanctuary Movement*. (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, Inc. 1987). Ann Crittenden. *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision*. (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

¹⁰ Hilary Cunningham. *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995). Susan Bibler Coutin. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993). Christian Smith. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹¹ Hilary Cunningham. *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995).

interrelated national movements that challenged Reagan's policies in Central America: Sanctuary, Witness for Peace, and Pledge of Resistance. In contrast, research on the regional or local level outside of Tucson is limited to Robin Lorentzen's ethnographic study of twenty-nine women in Chicago. She argues that women produced and comprised the majority of members in the movement, objecting strongly to its previous portrayal as male-dominated. Though an important gender analysis, her research focuses on a small ethnographic sample within the city of Chicago; her perspective is intriguing, but limited until other researchers expand her evidence.¹²

Most recently, Maria Cristina Garcia's article, "'Dangerous Times Call for Risky Responses': Latino Immigration and Sanctuary 1981-2001," addresses the historical legacy of Sanctuary.¹³ Arguing that Sanctuary is not in fact dead, she sees the movement continuing into the present in both different and similar ways, highlighting people's commitment to social justice projects currently, as well as individual activists who still criticize United States policy in Central America, especially the increasing number of refugees crossing our borders who are still fleeing violence. Garcia also argues that as an ethical movement, it held a place for an important kind of activist citizenship:

"The sanctuary movement also served Americans, although in a very different fashion, by focusing attention on constitutional and philosophical issues important to a democratic society: the relationship between church and state and the dialectic between power and resistance, civil disobedience, and civil initiative."¹⁴

My examination of the Sanctuary Movement will ask how one particular group responded to a crisis which helped expand the meanings of a "democratic" society. My

¹² Robin Lorentzen, *Women in the Sanctuary Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

¹³ Gastón Espinosa, Elizondo Virgilio P., and Miranda Jesse. *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Maria Cristina Garcia, "'Dangerous Times Call for Risky Responses': Latino Immigration and Sanctuary 1981-2001" ed Espinosa, Virgilio, Jesse *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168.

research illuminates the story of Sanctuary in Detroit as a case study for better understanding the development of the Sanctuary Movement inside a Midwestern metropolitan setting. My in-depth analysis of a community of Metro-Detroiters who lived and acted on their ethical and religious impulses and were profoundly affected both consciously and unconsciously by its changing environs, offers nuances often lost by narratives with broader perspectives. Through nine oral history interviews and my archival research to compliment and complicate their testimony, I hope my efforts can offer more insight into the thoughts and actions of participants in the movement. I do not speak fully on their behalf, I hope to lend historical perspective to their individual reflections and experiences, yet allowing their voices to be heard as much as possible.

Detroit Sanctuary activists saw themselves and Central Americans linked together in a fight for human rights. The notion of a “universal declaration of human rights” that transcends the borders of nation-states has become increasingly significant not only among the general public, but also thoughtful scholars in history, political theory and philosophy, as well as human rights workers and organizations which transcend national borders to accomplish a wide variety of human welfare work in the world at large. Scholars debate the origins of the phrase “human rights” over space and time. In her recent work *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt offers an intellectual and cultural history that begins with the rise in novel reading and its ability to generate empathy among Western readers. The language of human rights—utilized in the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789, both anticipating the more modern the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948—expanded as people not originally meant to be included made claims to human

rights won their claims over time.¹⁵ Samuel Moyn disagrees with historians such as Hunt who, he insists, place what he argues is a recent development too deep in the past, obscuring what is different about current human rights ideology and those of the past. The language of the 1970s, he argues is new.¹⁶

Why should we care?

Detroit at present is often perceived as a dying and disordered city, the worst-case scenario in terms of the destructive effects of deindustrialization and the effects of racially discriminatory policies.¹⁷ Listening to the stories of Sanctuary activists committed to both the injustices in Central America and problems of poverty and racial discord within their own city helps us to understand that there were a myriad people and political movements that thrived in Detroit during the 1970s and 1980s. Sanctuary was only one of them. In their fight for human rights, the nine individuals I interviewed explained they came to feel they must hold their government accountable to the ideals they learned as children: those truths quoted in the Declaration of Independence which claimed to be “self evident.” “All men *were* “created equal:” they were “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” In turn, every citizen ought to have knowledge of its government’s policies

¹⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

¹⁶ Samuel Moyn. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ For example see Ze’ev Chafets, *Devil’s Night and other True Tales of Detroit* (New York City: Random House, 1990). For an example of what has become known as “ruin porn” see “The Ruins of Detroit” <http://detroityes.com/downtown/index.html>. For a documentary portrayal of Detroit in crisis see *A City on Fire: The Story of '68 Detroit Tigers* (HBO, 2002).

at home and abroad; knowledge enabled them to hold their government accountable to these founding ideals.¹⁸

Chapters: The Road Map

Chapter One of this thesis begins with an attempt to explain both the cause of Central Americans' flight from their homelands and the historical forces creating Metro-Detroit's increasingly unequal economic and racial conditions leading up to and continuing through the 1980s. Once this context is explained, it will lay out Sanctuary's development within Detroit's existing Central American Solidarity Community.

Aware of their whiteness within an increasingly black, impoverished city, Detroit Sanctuary workers, natives of Detroit themselves, saw connections—economically and individually—between Central America and their hometown. With increasing sophistication they paired economic and individual human suffering across the geographic gulf between two places in crisis. In Chapter Two I argue that sanctuary workers demonstrated awareness of Detroit's own 'urban crisis' in thought and action, linking economic and human adversity with greater clarity over time. Working with Raul and Valeria challenged people to reconsider their assumptions about Central Americans and simultaneously their work within their city as the group overall shifted in their understanding of Central Americans' suffering from sympathy to empathy.

Challenging the Reagan Administration's policies by supporting the Gonzalez family represented a greater risk than previous efforts by the Detroit Central American Solidarity Community to raise awareness about Central America. Chapter Three focuses

¹⁸ Flyer "Sanctuary-The Blood Stops Here" undated. Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder: Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.

on the motivations of the Sanctuary workers I interviewed and the interconnectedness they saw between faith, politics, and human rights. They challenged their government as people of faith *and* as citizens of the United States whose belief in human rights transcended borders. Though many Sanctuary workers would shift their attention from the crisis in Central America to Detroit's own "urban crisis," the Sanctuary Movement had lasting effects on their continued thought and action.

Detroit Sanctuary meant many things to many people. The people I talked with remembered Sanctuary as a primary factor in enabling them to look critically at their own country, a country they grew up admiring as citizens taught to believe in democracy and equal opportunity for all. Suddenly that same country, they learned, was supporting the violation of human rights. This experience of disconnect and contradiction pushed them to learn more, to meet people, hear stories, and listen to voices they discovered had been silenced. This personal and political awakening changed their lives forever. Detroit was the context for this personal transformation, the city itself challenged people to reconsider their political understandings and personal motivations, to ask the question of how much else, if they had misunderstood so much, they needed to revisit and rethink. The experience changed people, like Phyllis Livermore, who gradually understood that she and her friends needed to push harder at the boundaries and barriers of church, state, the personal, and political in order to address what was clearly an ethical crisis of national proportion.

CHAPTER ONE

SET THE BARN ON FIRE AND LOCK THE DOOR: The Causes and Context of Detroit Sanctuary

*"I don't feel unpatriotic when I say that I believe those policies to be terribly wrong and that they are causing terrible human suffering. I do feel they need to be examined and changed."
~ Phyllis Livermore, Detroit Sanctuary worker¹*

The Parish Council of St. Rita Catholic Church in Detroit, Michigan resolved on December 15, 1983 to declare St. Rita a “sanctuary for refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, as a demonstration of our commitment to people fleeing for their lives, and as a public witness to our government to cease arming nations and urge negotiations to settle the long-standing problems plaguing the people of Central America.”² With the declaration, St. Rita’s Parish joined the Sanctuary Movement emerging rapidly across the country. The “problems plaguing the people of Central America” through the 1970s and 1980s were unprecedented, but not unfamiliar, political and military violence. Central Americans left their homes in staggering numbers, fleeing otherwise inescapable violence and political repression. At home, Metro-Detroit experienced its own problems with ever increasing levels of poverty and racial discrimination. This chapter focuses on the conditions from which people fled in Central America, the role and effects of United States policy, and the National Sanctuary Movement's interactions with Detroit efforts to raise awareness about Central America and to challenge government policies.

¹ Introductory remarks by Phyllis Livermore to the to the United Methodist Congregation in Detroit, undated. Personal Files of Phyllis Livermore. Birmingham, Michigan.

² Letter announcing St. Rita’s Declaration as a public sanctuary, 15 December 1983. Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder: Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.

I will outline the origins of the two crises Detroit Central American Solidarity activists confronted. First, the history and conditions that caused Central Americans to flee in unprecedented numbers and how U.S. policies affecting the region. United States citizens who became aware of conditions in Central America and their government's complicity responded. Second, the National Sanctuary Movement fit into Detroit's own active Central American Solidarity Community and specifically a religiously based organization, the Michigan Interfaith Committee on Central American Human rights, with which the National Sanctuary Movement became affiliated.

Crisis Abroad:

U.S.-Latin American Relations and the Causes of a Central American Exodus

As early as the end of the nineteenth century, the United States played a direct role in Latin American history.³ The forces of neocolonialism, nationalism, Marxism, and Cold War ideology shaped the relationship between the United States and Latin America over the course of the twentieth century. First, neocolonialism developed at the end of the nineteenth century, established the United States' self-conceived right to intervene in Latin American affairs. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in 1905 crystallized the United States' direct interventionist attitude. Roosevelt's Corollary established the United States Marines as the "police force" of the Western hemisphere, which meant America could intervene in Latin American countries' politics through military force throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.⁴ A rising sense of nationalism, coupled with the 1929 economic crash, resulted in a dramatic change across many Latin American countries. New nationalist governments looked within themselves

³ For an overview of Latin American history see John Chasteen *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁴ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 206.

to fuel development through “import substitution industrialization” (ISI). These internal shifts, provoked by external economic factors, generated prosperity and greater equality for many across Latin America. Meanwhile, the United States stepped back from Latin American affairs and made a pledge of non-intervention by 1933, as part of a “Good Neighbor Policy” during wartime.⁵

The United States’ promise of non-intervention did not last, however, as political leaders in the Post World War II era saw Latin American affairs through the lens of the Cold War and proxy forces, directed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), replaced the earlier, direct intervention strategy.⁶ Undoubtedly, Marxism began to influence the nationalism of some Latin American countries, fueling anti-American sentiment. United States policy makers found this development unacceptable, issuing the Declaration of Caracas in 1954, through the Organization of American States, to condemn Marxist revolutionary ideology as “alien” to the Western Hemisphere. Any Marxist revolutionary movement, therefore, was seen as a foreign invasion.⁷

The Cuban Revolution (1952-1958) served to confirm growing fears among United States politicians that their neighbors to the south would be overrun by communism.⁸ As a result, President Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress (1961), utilizing counterinsurgency tactics as an easier path to success than boosting long-term economic development in Latin America. The United States continued to act in Latin America, mostly through CIA proxy forces, through the 1960s, ‘70s, and

⁵ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 230.

⁶ *Ibid*, 258.

⁷ *Ibid*, 259.

⁸ *Ibid*, 260.

increasingly in the 1980s.⁹ Thus, the United States has played a direct role in affecting Latin America's development since the end of the nineteenth century: Kennedy's decision cemented its policy in the 20th, mapping neocolonialism and nationalism, onto Cold War ideology.

Central America: The Case of El Salvador and Guatemala

While much of Latin America enjoyed the complex benefits of new nationalist spirits and "import substitution industrialization" (ISI), Central America remained largely in a neocolonial state through the 1930s. In countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala, vast inequalities remained between landowning oligarchies and indigenous people, who made up the majority of the population and worked the land. These rural oligarchies continued to dominate Central American countries through the 1970s.¹⁰ Military dictatorships or militarily-controlled governments enjoyed the support of the United States through the Cold War because of their virulent anticommunism.¹¹ Landowning families of Guatemala and El Salvador reigned over their countries, enjoying the benefits of indigenous peasants labor, and living in fear of rebellion.¹²

Guatemala remained in the clutches of neocolonialism through the 1930s, but experienced a "decade of spring" from 1944-54, which promised to undo the enduring inequalities between a small number of landowners and multinational corporations, on the one hand, and the majority of indigenous Guatemalans who worked the land, on the other. Through the 1930s, German coffee growers maintained neocolonial control over

⁹ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 279-81.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 297.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 298.

¹² *Ibid*, 298.

the land and indigenous people of Guatemala.¹³ The democratic election of two nationalist presidents, however, promised change for this deeply divided nation. First, in 1944 President Juan Jose Arevalo, a self described “spiritual socialist,” called for better pay for workers.¹⁴ Jacobo Arbenz, the following president, went further. Powerful coffee plantation owners treated illiterate Mayan peasants, who made up half the country’s population, like animals. In order to reverse this dramatic inequality in his country between the landowning powers and majority peasants, Arbenz confiscated large estates and expropriated land from the United States, land owned by the United Fruit Company and foreign railways. United States policymakers, who also had personal stakes in companies such as United Fruit, increasingly saw the actions and policies of Arevalo - and especially Arbenz - as indications that communism was creeping into the country by the back door.¹⁵

While Guatemalans began to experience the positive results of Arevalo and Arbenz’s changes, United States policymakers decided to stop the perceived advance of communism through “indirect intervention.” When the Guatemalan representative to the Organization of American States voted against the anticommunist Declaration of Caracas, it was clear that Latin Americans were united in calling for solidarity against an imperial United States. While Marxist ideology had gained traction amongst nationalists, activists, and organizers, however, they were not, as the United States claimed, communists aligned with the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Still, United States policy makers saw their

¹³ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 260, 241.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 260.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 261

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 260

response as communism, and decided to act as Arbenz began to establish a people's militia, thus ending Guatemala's "Decade of Spring."¹⁷

Influenced by Cold War ideology and personal interest, important U.S. policymakers endorsed the C.I.A. invasion of Guatemala in 1954, primarily by using proxy forces from Honduras. This "indirect intervention" overthrew the democratically elected Arbenz government and established a murderous military-controlled dictatorship until the 1980s.¹⁸ The regime mounted a "dirty war" against its own people, targeting rural guerrilla armies, student activists, and labor leaders. Repression was marked by the "disappearance" of anyone who appeared to disagree with the regime.¹⁹ The government, moreover, forced largely neutral indigenous peasants into new, 'model' villages, which were monitored to wipe out any trace of potential dissent, always called "communism." Death was impossible to escape during these mass relocations, and death tolls reached 200,000, 95% of that at the hands of the military.²⁰ The U.S.-planned and sponsored invasion of Guatemala in 1954 demonstrated the first instance of "indirect intervention" in Latin America, characteristic of their Cold War relationship.

In conditions similar to Guatemala's, an undemocratic, anticommunist government controlled El Salvador, with power concentrated in a landed oligarchy that had emerged in the late nineteenth century. During the Spanish conquest, of what is now El Salvador, Spaniards forced indigenous peoples off of their land and onto volcanic slopes. When coffee cultivation began in the 1870s, the ruling class began to covet the

¹⁷ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 259.

¹⁸ For instance Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Chief Allen Dulles, brothers, had personal interest in the United Fruit Company's banana empire see Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 261.

¹⁹ United States strategists referred to these tactics as low intensity conflict see Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 298.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 298. The indigenous Guatemalan woman, Rigoberta Menchu brought attention to these issues in the 1984 with her testimonio see *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (London: Verso, 1984).

fertile slopes. Instead of again pushing people off of their land, an oligarchy took control and forced indigenous Salvadorans into agricultural peon labor working the coffee plantations. El Salvador's dense population and inequitably distributed resources caused starvation and acute loss of power in the rural areas of the country, a process which escalated into the 1930s. Land-owning oligarchies maintained control of the country until the 1960s and 70s through the military, and military-controlled regional governments, which terrorized the people with increasing violence.²¹

Two massacres demonstrated El Salvador's unstable state and the violence by which the minority maintained control. First, the Salvadoran Communist Party led an uprising in 1932, known as "The Year of the Slaughter." When Dictator Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez put an end to the revolt, more than 10,000 people, mostly indigenous, had been slaughtered. In 1981, a second massacre was perpetrated by a U.S.-trained battalion which systematically eliminated the small village of El Mozote, killing hundreds of unresisting men, women, and children, an act based on incorrect information that they allegedly supported guerrilla forces.²² This second case was not unique; similar indiscriminate acts of violence consumed the country through the 1980s. Like Guatemala, anti-democratic, military- controlled government ruled El Salvador, with United States' support, due to their strong anticommunist stance.

Violence and poverty in El Salvador did not go unopposed. Leftists and religious factions opposed the great discrepancies in wealth, and increasing poverty, of the majority of Salvadorans. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), a left-winged organization, fought a guerilla war against the United States-backed Salvadoran

²¹ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 302.

²² *Ibid*, 304.

government.¹ In the 1970s the Catholic Church, historically a bastion of the government, began to speak out against the violence of poverty it witnessed. Influenced by Liberation Theology, Catholic priests and nuns worked with the poor and became targets of anticommunism themselves.²³ For example, the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, denounced anticommunism, massive poverty, and army violence. On March 24, 1980, a United States-trained political assassin shot and killed Romero while he celebrated mass.²⁴ The war against “communism”—which had expanded in meaning, targeting first the FMLN and then uninvolved peasants and finally the Archbishop himself—continued until 1992, when the FMLN signed a peace accord.

Central Americans, in fear and under economic hardship, fled their homes. They also fled very real threats of violence and death. Many refugees had themselves been targets of torture. Others, the lucky ones, had word the army was coming for them and left. Still more left because their homes had been destroyed, leaving them with nothing and no one. Eventually, the murders of religious supporters such as Archbishop Romero, as well as the dramatic increase in the flow of Central American refugees crossing the Mexican border, began to draw the attention of United States citizens.²⁵

***Crisis at Home:
From the Arsenal of Democracy to America’s “First Major Third World City”***

²³ Anticommunist death squads spread the slogan “Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest” (Ibid, 303). Liberation Theology developed in Latin America through the 1960s and 70s, most notably the Conference of Medellin in 1968. For a summary and analysis of the history of liberation theology in the Latin American context, see Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, (Chicago 1991). For commentary on different liberation theologies in the United States, see Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (ed.), *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, (New York 2010).

²⁴ Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 303.

²⁵ Ibid, 304.

Detroit exemplified the changing metropolitan landscape of United States cities following World War II. Federal policies and the transformation of the economy from an industrial to service base—coupled together—dramatically changed the metropolitan landscape and, specifically, Detroit. Federal policies encouraged industrial de-concentration, which began in World War II.²⁶ Concurrently, beginning in the New Deal Era, the Federal government has channeled resources disproportionately to the South. Continuing the reallocation of resources, the Cold War fueled the rise of the military-industrial-complex, centered in the Sunbelt region. Postwar highway construction facilitated the process of decentralization; federally funded highway construction after 1956 decreased the necessity of central industrial location. Many companies moved to gain access to growing markets in California and the urban West. Federal policies exacerbated the problems that increasing deindustrialization—the process of “closing, downsizing, and relocation of plants and sometimes whole industries”—created in industrial-based cities such as Detroit.²⁷

Decades of exclusionary practices, continued economic decline, and racial violence produced conditions of inequity and increasing anger, making the violent response of the 1967 Detroit Riot by its residents inevitable. Racially discriminatory practices during the dramatic restructuring of metropolitan Detroit caused a disconnect between the jobs available in the growing suburban economies and increasingly black and impoverished communities contained, by a range of economic and social policies, in Detroit. For example, racially discriminatory housing practices kept most black Detroiters

²⁶ Thomas J. Sugrue *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 140.

²⁷ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 127.

from moving into the expanding suburban communities where industry had moved and jobs could be found.²⁸

As their city underwent dramatic structural changes, Detroiters—residents, politicians, and activists—continued to work for better conditions and greater equality in their city, and country, through the post Civil Rights Era. In response to a federal retreat from housing under Reagan’s policies of ‘New Federalism’ during the 1980s, Detroit’s fair and affordable housing activism picked up, culminating with the creation of the SOS Coalition in 1985.²⁹ At this time, Detroit residents and activists participated in national movements around environmental issues, the Nuclear Freeze, and, increasingly, supported Central American Solidarity.³⁰ Far from a dead and empty city, Detroit, through its residents, activists, politicians, and labor unions, faced and fought the complex racial and economic politics of the national ‘urban crisis,’ as well as other national and international peace and justice issues.³¹

Central American Solidarity Activism in Detroit

Before the Sanctuary Movement began at the Mexican Border, Detroit already had an active community of people engaged with Central American issues. Galvanized by their faith and knowledge of the violence in Central America, people came together to form a variety of organizations, such as the faith-based Michigan Interfaith Committee on

²⁸ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 141.

²⁹ Reagan’s policies of “‘New Federalism’ argued the market could best provide for low income housing and many other social needs” resulting in a one-third cut of the total budget for low-income housing from 1981 to 1988 see Todd C. Shaw. *Now Is the Time!: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 92. The SOS Coalition was made up of 35 Detroit based organizations see Shaw, *Now Is the Time*, 114.

³⁰ Ken and Geraldine Grunow, conversation with author, 28 October 2012. Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

³¹ Heather Ann Thompson *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Central American Human Rights (MICAHA), co-founded by one of the individuals who spoke with me: Bill O'Brien. The goal was to raise awareness about Central America and challenge U.S. Foreign policy. MICAHA and the other Central American solidarity organizations had always struggled to connect Detroiters to experiences far from home.³² But the situation began to change in 1982, when events at the United States-Mexico border kick-started the Sanctuary network that would quickly link up with Detroit's Central American Solidarity Community, in particular the religiously based MICAHA.

MICAHA worked to raise awareness about Central America through the Metro-Detroit faith community; the very name of the organization suggested its commitment to the Judeo-Christian tradition: "Do Justice, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with your God," Micah 6:8.³³ Co-founded in 1980 by Bill O'Brien, Kit Concannon and a handful of others, MICAHA situated itself within an existing network of organizations committed to solidarity with the peoples of Central America, such as Friends of Nicaragua and the Detroit Chapter of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which later became the Central American Solidarity Committee.³⁴ MICAHA reflected the typical community-organizing model: an advisory board, steering committee, a limited staff that performed the day to day work, and reliance on a volunteer membership for support. In its early years MICAHA employed common grassroots organizing models: giving presentations, holding protests, showing films, organizing teach-ins and

³² Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 30 November 2012. Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 11 November 2012.

³³ "This is what God asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly,/to walk humbly with your God./(Micah 6:8)" see "Statement of Philosophical Principals", undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 4, Folder 1 "MICAHA Structure, Goals, Misc 1983-88.

³⁴ First Year Report 1980; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5. For the records of these various organizations including the Detroit Chapter of CISPES and the Friends of Nicaragua; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection The Organizations in Solidarity with Central America Collection.

conferences, and coordinating with related groups. As a religious group, MICAHA reached out to Detroit's church going community, a constituency largely untapped by the existing secular Central American Solidarity groups³⁵.

MICAHA was inclusive rather than exclusive in its religious expression; members worked seamlessly with secular groups. From its introductory letter to area organizations already concerned with Central America, MICAHA announced itself as a "group of Christians" but expanded its directive to include "all people" willing to follow the theology behind the founding bible verse.³⁶ This letter went out to groups such as The Friends of Nicaragua, demonstrating MICAHA's efforts to work within the existing community.³⁷ Moreover, MICAHA's newsletter, *A Voice of the Voiceless*, consistently advertised events of other area groups, co-sponsoring many.³⁸ I will return to MICAHA's philosophy again in Chapter Three, but for now it is important to understand that Bill O'Brien and the other founders conceived of MICAHA as a religious organization committed to the people of Central America and to human rights, more broadly.

The National and Detroit Sanctuary Movements

Reaching from the United States border with Canada to the border with Mexico, people reacted powerfully as Central American refugees spoke of realities in their homelands and the horrors they had fled. The act of housing refugees in places of worship, publicly declaring a church or synagogue a "sanctuary" for Central American

³⁵ For the archives of Detroit's Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the Detroit Central American Solidarity Committee, and others; Detroit, Michigan, Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection.

³⁶ Introductory Letter to The Friends of Nicaragua from Larry Cohen, 9 December 1980; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 3, Folder 37.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ For a near complete record of MICAHA's newsletters; University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30.

refugees, began primarily in Tucson, Arizona, in 1982.³⁹ The idea quickly spread across the nation, connecting with existing communities just beginning to organize or already working on Central American issues. Soon, a network of churches willing to publicly house refugees quickly grew into a national movement and The Chicago Religious Task Force took on the role of coordinating Sanctuary activity across the country.⁴⁰

This growing National Sanctuary Movement made contact with Detroit's Central American Solidarity community in late 1982 when Bill O'Brien, a co-founder of MICAH introduced the organization to the idea of public sanctuary as a means raising awareness in the Detroit area.⁴¹ Though it challenged the United States foreign policy, MICAH activities prior to the Sanctuary Project operated within its citizens' right to free speech and protest. The Sanctuary Project moved beyond those boundaries, and therefore was subject to more careful consideration. During this period, several meetings of MICAH staff, members, supporters, and other interested persons and groups came together to discuss adopting the Sanctuary Project.⁴²

Public inauguration of the Detroit Sanctuary Project took place on March 21, 1983, at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Greektown, commissioning the send-off of a

³⁹ At about the same time a church in the San Francisco Bay area responding to a similar situation declared itself a sanctuary for Central Americans; see Susan Bibler Coutin. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ For an overview and analysis of the Sanctuary Movement in relation to two other U.S. Central American Peace Movements, Witness for Peace and Pledge of Resistance, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a commentary on the Sanctuary Movement's development in Tucson and analysis of the role of religion and politics see Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁴¹ Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 11 November 2012. See also Bill O'Brien listed as the coordinator of the Sanctuary Project in "MICAH's Yearly Report 1982"; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5 "Detroit Sanctuary Coalition Project 1984-6."

⁴² "Detroit Sanctuary Project" Meeting Recap and Announcement, 17 February 1983; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5 "Detroit Sanctuary Coalition Project 1984-6."

Salvadoran family, who stopped over in the city on their way to permanent sanctuary with a Washington, D.C. congregation. Approximately fifty people gathered in support of the newly formed Detroit Project, which received coverage by the *Detroit News* and *Michigan Catholic*. After a public statement, the gathering sang several hymns, as was typical of MICAH influenced demonstrations.⁴³ Heralding the beginning of the Detroit Sanctuary Project, now part of the National Sanctuary Movement, the groups named themselves “citizens of this country and people of faith,” combining both their moral and legal claims in opposing U.S. policy. At first MICAH’s subcommittee, The Detroit Sanctuary Project, defined Sanctuary in Detroit. Over time, a broader coalition of people and organizations emerged. For simplicity, I will reference this overlapping community as Detroit Sanctuary unless further differentiation is necessary.

On December 15, 1983, St. Rita’s Catholic Parish in Detroit announced that it had become a haven for Central Americans, as part of the growing National Sanctuary Movement. The Gonzalez family arrived in July of 1984.⁴⁴ MICAH’s newsletter, *A Voice of the Voiceless*, and mailings to MICAH’s membership and supporting groups advertised St. Rita’s declaration.⁴⁵ I will return to the declaration in more detail in Chapter Two.

Within the directive of MICAH’s Detroit Sanctuary Project, Central Americans, namely Raul and Valeria Gonzalez, who took refuge at St. Rita’s educated the community about

⁴³ For a description of the rally see “The Blood Stops Here”, *On The Edge: A Catholic Worker Newspaper*, Summer 1983, Vol. 8, No. 3; Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, “Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.” See also, news clippings covering the rally at St. Mary’s in Greektown “Rally rips refugee policy” *Detroit News*, 22 March 1983, 3-A. “Salvadoran refugees seek sanctuary”, *The Michigan Catholic*, 25 March 1983; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5 “Detroit Sanctuary Coalition Project 1984-6.” For pictures of the family’s arrival at St. Rita’s see Figures 13 and 14.

⁴⁴ Letter announcing St. Rita’s Declaration as a public sanctuary, 15 December 1983. Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder: Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.

⁴⁵ Announcement of the Detroit Sanctuary Project, seeking support; “A Voice of the Voiceless”, October 1983, University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30, Folder 1 “MICAH Newsletter A Voice of the Voiceless 1982-3.”

conditions in Central America. Several refugees stayed for brief periods in public sanctuary at St. Rita's through the beginning of 1984, before the Gonzalez family arrived. The Gonzalezes were fleeing from El Salvador, and they would live at St. Rita's for the rest of the decade.

For MICAHA, Raul and Valeria Gonzalez were the ideal refugees: able and willing to help them promote awareness of Central American issues in the Metro-Detroit communities of faith. The family arrived in Detroit in the summer of 1984 by means of the 'Freedom Train,' a highly publicized caravan that brought the family across the country and was meant to enhance the visibility of the cause.⁴⁶ Raul, Valeria, and their children lived at St. Rita's until 1990, when major shifts in the Sanctuary project presaged its eventual decline; until that time, the Gonzalez's presence advertized the cause in myriad ways. Raul gave talks at MICAHA conferences, and eventually moved on to coordinate his own efforts to support Salvadorans in Detroit.

The name 'Gonzalez' was actually a pseudonym to protect relatives still living in El Salvador. Like other Central American participants in the National Sanctuary Movement, the Mariona (Gonzalez) family had lived a middle-class existence in El Salvador: Raul taught at a local high school; his wife Valeria was a nurse.⁴⁷ Like most Salvadorans, Raul was sympathetic to the guerilla forces of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, though he was not a guerilla, a guerilla supporter, or a communist. In 1983, a paramilitary squad had kidnapped, tortured, and imprisoned Raul for seven months. His "crime" was owning too many books, which soldiers cited when they

⁴⁶ Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 5 December 2012. "Sanctuary !! Freedom Train a Success" *A Voice of the Voiceless*, August 1984; University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30, Folder 2 "MICAHA Newsletter... Voice of the Voiceless 1984." See also, Figures 1-3.

⁴⁷ I will maintain reference to Ernesto and Teresa Mariona as Raul and Valeria Gonzalez, their pseudonyms while participating in the Sanctuary Movement.

accused him of communism. After days of physical and mental abuse, his captors left him alone, lying on a concrete slab. His will unbroken, he remembered making “a promise to God to say what [was] going on in [his] country—to go everywhere, to talk to everybody.”⁴⁸ Eventually released, the family ran, fearing for their safety. Originally setting their sights on asylum in Canada, Raul’s vow led them to change course and decide to participate in the U.S. Sanctuary Movement, a more challenging and less secure route to freedom and liberty. The family made the dangerous border crossing through the desert, and, once settled, acquiesced to the demanding speaking requirements. Raul’s “complacency had died with his old life in El Salvador.”⁴⁹

As the couple fulfilled Raul’s promise, made when he was a prisoner in El Salvador, the Detroit Sanctuary Project put together a powerful informational presentation, reproduced countless times among various audiences in the Metro-Detroit area. Phyllis Livermore, an important supporter of Detroit Sanctuary and the Gonzalez family, specifically, often appeared in speaking engagement together with Valeria Gonzalez. She would begin by introducing Valeria, while sketching out the history and background of conditions in Central America, finishing up with an overview of the National Sanctuary Movement in the U.S.⁵⁰

As the Sanctuary Movement gained membership throughout the 1980s, the Reagan Administration, unfortunately, began to closely scrutinize both the Canadian and Mexican borders. By the middle of the decade, the FBI was conducting hostile investigations of the movement. In Tucson, Arizona, eleven Sanctuary workers were

⁴⁸ This description of the Gonzalez family and their route to Detroit Sanctuary relies heavily on “Sanctuary: Detroiters join movement for Latin American refugees,” *Detroit Free Press* 25 October 1987; The Personal Records of Phyllis Livermore.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

indicted on charges of smuggling aliens on January 10, 1985.⁵¹ Darlene Nicgorski, a prominent National figure of the Sanctuary Movement and part of the Tucson group, was in Adrian, Michigan, when she learned of her indictment.⁵² Concurrently, Detroit Sanctuary came under surveillance. MICAH reported serious harassment, including phone tapping and death threats.⁵³ In a gesture of transparency, MICAH's newsletter published an "Open Letter to the Surveillance Community and Our Brothers and Sisters in the FBI."⁵⁴ The letter outlined MICAH's activities, inviting the FBI to attend their meetings, and even providing contact information to arrange a presentation of their work and accomplishments. The fact that MICAH's other work remained clearly within legal parameters led the group to assume that the harassment resulted from its involvement in Sanctuary, however, the investigation of MICAH and Detroit Sanctuary only served to propel members to an even stronger commitment.⁵⁵

National and local investigations by the FBI caused a restructuring of Sanctuary work in Michigan, including the creation of several new groups. The Sanctuary Council was organized in July of 1985 to coordinate the activities of the four public Sanctuaries across Michigan and their supporting organizations to coordinate their activities and goals at a state-wide level. Raul Gonzalez spear-headed the organization of his own group, CORESAM (Committee of Refugees in Sanctuary in Michigan). Its objective was

⁵¹ For a commentary on the story of Sanctuary on trial see Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

⁵² "A Conspiracy of Love" by Darlene Nicgorski; MICAH's Newsletter *A Voice of the Voiceless*, February 1985, University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30, Folder 3 "MICAH Newsletter A Voice of the Voiceless 1985."

⁵³ "MICAH Yearly Report 1985-1986"; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 27 "MICAH Reports 1984-5."

⁵⁴ *The Voice of the Voiceless* May 1985; University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B30, Folder 3 "MICAH Newsletter A Voice of the Voiceless 1985."

⁵⁵ "MICAH Yearly Report 1985-1986"; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 27 "MICAH Reports 1984-5."

to unify and coordinate the work of Central American refugees in Michigan. Both coordinating bodies were created to respond to pressures applied by the U.S. government on the movement and the subsequent realization of the need to act collectively, rather than unilaterally.⁵⁶

Conclusion

United States foreign and domestic policy shaped the realities of Central Americans fleeing for their lives. United States' policy slowed Central American countries' economic development. The United States Sanctuary Movement responded to Central American refugees with compassionate concern: as their numbers increased these efforts grew to a national movement over the course of the 1980s. This faith-based movement intersected perfectly with MICAHA, an existing religiously oriented organization committed to Central American Solidarity in Detroit, already working to raise awareness about conditions in Central America. The Detroit Sanctuary Project began as part of MICAHA, but grew to include many supportive organizations and people I refer to as simply Detroit Sanctuary. MICAHA and the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition played the most important roles, working directly with Raul and Valeria for the longest period and therefore shaping Sanctuary in Detroit, as we will see next.

⁵⁶ Letter from Raul Gonzalez to the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition, 5 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

CHAPTER TWO

DETROIT IS MY HOMETOWN

*"I think the involvement with the Sanctuary movement and in Central American solidarity helped me see what was going on here more clearly: the racism in everything."
~ Cathey DeSantis, Sanctuary worker*

On May 25, 1993, Ken and Geraldine Grunow, residents of Detroit and supporters of Detroit Sanctuary, received a letter from Phyllis Livermore, a Birmingham resident committed to Sanctuary, requesting money to help the Marionas, previously known under the pseudonym of the Gonzalezes. On behalf of the family Phyllis asked for financial support to cover the cost of applying for legal status to reside within the United States. The Marionas had been living in Detroit, participating in the city's Sanctuary movement for close to a decade.¹ Fleeing political repression and violence in El Salvador, the family had testified to their experiences many times throughout the Metro-Detroit area, the heart of the Detroit Sanctuary movement. This request for additional financial assistance, however, came to residents of a Detroit Metro area suffering from its own economic and racial crises.

Detroit Sanctuary organizations and supporters, aware of Detroit's own "urban crisis" and the relatively homogenous white composition of their organization, worked to diversify themselves and overcome the "divide" that appeared to separate the crisis of U.S. policy in Central America and the urban crisis and race riots at home. First, they worked quite self-consciously to diversify membership and support, even though the core activists remained mostly white and middle-class. Raul and Valeria's presence, including

¹ Letter from Phyllis Livermore to Friends of Sanctuary, 25 May 1993; Detroit, Michigan, Personal Records of Ken and Geraldine Grunow.

their talks throughout the Metro-Detroit area, made otherwise-abstract Central American violence a reality for Detroiters who came face to face with injustices caused, at least in part, by their own government. With increasing sophistication, Detroit Sanctuary leaders rhetorically paired the economic and human suffering of Metro-Detroit to the devastation of Central American nations, connecting and moving people to act in solidarity with their neighbors abroad.

Detroit Sanctuary had run its course by the time Ken and Geraldine received the request for funds in 1993. Rather than continue the Central American Solidarity work that existed prior to the Sanctuary Movement in Detroit, many Sanctuary workers had shifted their focus to Detroit's own crises, in particular housing and community development. Activism surrounding housing in Detroit picked up in the 1980s, in response to significant cuts in Federal funding.² Working directly with Raul and Valeria challenged unconscious assumptions Sanctuary workers had about Central Americans in need of their help. Learning to work with Raul and Valeria as equals, rather than as diminished or disenfranchised oppressed, pushed people to reconsider their role in their own city's crisis and their neighbors,' especially people of color, rights to equality and justice.

Detroit Sanctuary: Pairing Economic and Human Suffering Abroad and at Home

Though the majority of those involved in Detroit Sanctuary, especially its core supporters, were white and would remain so, Sanctuary-related organizations acknowledged and actively worked to include a more racially and economically diverse base, but never to great success. Reflecting national levels of involvement, the majority of people participating in Detroit Sanctuary were middle-class and white; but to their

² Todd C. Shaw. *Now Is the Time!: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 92.

credit Detroit activists understood their whiteness and tried to diversify racially and economically.³ In my interviews, every available person was white, and these testimonies acknowledged the unbalanced composition of Sanctuary. Demonstrating a commitment to racial diversity and hoping to facilitate the involvement of communities of color, MICAH located their first headquarters on Vernor in the “Latino neighborhood of Southwest Detroit.”⁴ Similarly, the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition most often met at St. Rita’s in Northwest Detroit. MICAH’s positioning within Southwest Detroit and the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition’s meeting place at St. Rita’s offer evidence of their efforts to be Detroit community based. They especially tried to enable the primarily Latino and black residents of these neighborhoods to participate fully in Sanctuary-related activities.

During the 1980s, St. Rita’s—the hub of Detroit Sanctuary— represented a diverse, Catholic parish in a working class neighborhood in Northwest Detroit. Bob O’Brien, a musician who often played at MICAH or Sanctuary related events, recalled St. Rita’s being in a “transitional neighborhood.”⁵ Father John Nowlan was the pastor of St. Rita’s Parish for nine years and present when the Parish Council made its decision to declare the church a public sanctuary to Central Americans fleeing their homes. In an interview about the Gonzalez family, Fr. Nowlan called the parish a “sort of ‘mixed bag’ of ethnic groups and social classes.”⁶ Not an affluent parish, people worried about the costs of caring for a refugee family’s every need.⁷ The heart of Sanctuary in Detroit, St.

³ For a comparison of people involved in the National Sanctuary Movement see Christian Smith *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), Table 7.1 “Comparison of Central America Peace Activists and All Adult Americans.”

⁴ Bill O’Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012.

⁵ Bob O’Brien, conversation with author, 9 November 2012.

⁶ “Sanctuary: Salvadoran refugees find a home—and a champion—in the church,” *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, 10 February 1985, 13; The Personal Records of Larry Cohen.

⁷ “Sanctuary: Salvadoran refugees find a home—and a champion—in the church,” *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, 10 February 1985, 13; The Personal Records of Larry Cohen.

Rita's parish, represented a more racially and economically diverse group of people than the core activists.

MICAH, to the activists credit, self-consciously worked to diversify its base. In 1985, the MICAH steering committee included in its plan for the year a clear directive to amplify communication and coordination with black churches. The Committee identified three related goals: (1) to "contact 10 Black Churches", (2) organize a "delegation sponsored by black churches" and (3) be present at an "upcoming dinner/rally for the black community."⁸ Recognizing the core racial composition of the activists as a "white group within Detroit," Tom Goddeeris and others worked to gain the support and involvement of black and Latino communities, groups, and leaders.⁹ Clearly, the Sanctuary Project and other activists for Central Americans understood their whiteness and tried to diversify their base by strategically locating their home base and reaching out to the black community.

Most Sanctuary workers were in fact natives of Detroit. Father Nowlan, who grew up on the West Side, dedicated his life to the residents of his parish.¹⁰ Those who knew him remembered him as a priest of the poor, devoted to just causes. For example, in the 1970s, he was loosely associated with the group "Christians for Socialism."¹¹ Similarly, Cathey DeSantis, a Sister of Saint Joseph, was also a "born and raised" Detroiter, growing up on the East Side of the city.¹² Tom Goddeeris also grew up on the East Side,

⁸ "The Schemes that Dreams are made of" MICAH Steering Committee Meeting 9 Oct 1985; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 12, Folder 21.

⁹ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with the author, 6 February 2013.

¹⁰ "Sanctuary: Salvadoran refugees find a home—and a champion—in the church," *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, 10 February 1985, The Personal Records of Larry Cohen. For further discussion of the role of parishes in Northern cities see John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996.

¹¹ Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012.

¹² Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, November 6, 2012.

leaving Detroit only to attend the University of Michigan before returning and becoming involved with the Central American Solidarity community.¹³ In addition, Bill and Bob O'Brien lived in the Detroit area, and both attended University of Detroit's Jesuit High School.¹⁴ Kate Carter remembered most people involved being from Detroit and involved in many activities around the city.¹⁵ Importantly, these white Sanctuary workers were not "foreign" imports to the city, however, but all locals themselves.

My evidence suggests that all of these people were deeply concerned about their city's "urban crisis," which made their position as a predominantly white group complicated. For instance, Phyllis Livermore "felt conscious of being a white privileged person" amongst "mostly white people in Detroit" working on Central American Solidarity issues.¹⁶ Working on Sanctuary when there was "all this need" in the city itself made her uncomfortable at times.¹⁷ Though she remembered that there were people of color in the Detroit organizations who worked on Central America issues, Phyllis "always wondered how they felt about all this white attention on Central America when there was so much need and 'civil rights lack' in Detroit."¹⁸ Perhaps unaware at the time of the full extent of the various historical forces contributing to racial and economic inequality, Phyllis clearly recognized peoples' lack of civil rights in the Metro-Detroit area.

Moreover, Sanctuary workers understood that their cause did not garner the full attention of the city; indeed Central American Solidarity work was only of many causes

¹³ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

¹⁴ Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012 and Bob O'Brien, conversation with author, 9 November 2012.

¹⁵ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

¹⁶ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

people supported at the time. Kate Carter, like Phyllis Livermore, recalled that we “were not oblivious to what was going on in Detroit.”¹⁹ Kate worked with people “involved all over the city.”²⁰ However, she also realized that “*we*,” meaning Central American Solidarity activists, “were aware of *them*,” as she referenced activists in housing, “but *they* all weren’t necessarily aware of *us*.”²¹ Detroit Sanctuary did not have a monopoly on the attention of the city, but Sanctuary workers remained profoundly aware of their racial and economic status and the issues facing the Metro-Detroit area.

Internally, MICAH acknowledged the economic challenges of working in Detroit and the corresponding opportunity to connect up with U.S. economic involvement in Cold War activities at an international level, but they did not, at first, capitalize on these complex connections, failing to find ways of making them known until later. For example, in a report on MICAH’s work organizing Congressional Action Committees around the state, a staff member noted “Michigan’s economic situation makes it a difficult area in which to focus on international issues, but it is also an excellent opportunity to educate the people of Michigan on the interrelationship of all the world’s poor.”²² In reflection, Larry Cohen, who was involved until 1985, noted rightly that MICAH did not make efforts during his time there to link Detroit-specific issues to the broader international problems of Central Americans.²³ In fact, MICAH activists understood the difficulties of working on an international issue in a city replete with its own stark injustices.

¹⁹ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Emphasis added; Ibid.

²² “MICAH Yearly Report 1983”; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 3, Folder 37.

²³ Larry Cohen, conversation with the author, 5 December 2012.

Early in Detroit Sanctuary, advertising efforts surrounding St. Rita's Declaration as a public sanctuary focused on the risks of joining the Sanctuary movement, rather than making the complex connections between Detroit and Central America. Initial flyers and letters spreading the word highlighted identification with the National Sanctuary Movement, religious motivations, and condemnation of government policies. An invitation to St. Rita's Sanctuary Declaration event conveyed to recipients that the parish had decided to act in order to "provide safe shelter," the religious imperative, and therefore "condemn U.S. government policy," the political implication of a religious act, fully aware it was an "act of civil disobedience," highlighting the risks church members took in making this declaration.²⁴ A flyer announcing St. Rita's public declaration goes directly to the heart of the declaration: hailing an act by religious people and organizations in response to violent injustice. It focused on saying "NO! to the US policy of deporting thousands of Salvadoran refugees" and "NO to the use of one billion of our tax dollars" to finance forces killing Salvadoran civilians and creating refugees. In the flyer, Sanctuary workers proclaimed "BASTA! ENOUGH! THE BLOOD STOPS HERE!!"²⁵ Clearly, initial publicity indicated the Sanctuary Movement's readiness to take action. In short, announcements advertising Sanctuary in Detroit focused on the actions of Detroit residents in the face of dramatic injustice abroad rather than highlighting economic connections between them.

²⁴ Announcement of St. Rita's declaration as a public sanctuary, Letter from the Detroit Sanctuary Project to Lois Leonard, 12 December 1983; Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder "Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85."

²⁵ "SANCTUARY- THE BLOOD STOPS HERE!!", Detroit Sanctuary Project Flyer; Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder "Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85."

Likewise, the text of the first public declarations made by Detroit Sanctuary did not illustrate the interrelationship between Central Americans and Detroiters. Rather, the statements focused on the participants and their decision to join the National Sanctuary Movement in order to take a stand and challenging policy, motivated by their faith and conscience. For instance, the Detroit Sanctuary Project's first public declaration at St. Mary's church on March 22, 1983 began: "Our Goal is to enable Detroit area people to respond in faith to a family of Salvadoran refugees by offering them public sanctuary in a local congregation."²⁶ The group defined 'Sanctuary' as a "concrete way to challenge the inhuman policy of the U.S. government in Central America" and a "direct service to Central Americans who are made refugees as a result of these policies."²⁷ A similar declaration that St. Rita's Parish Council passed, resolutely declared St. Rita's a "sanctuary for refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, as a demonstration of our commitment to people fleeing for their lives."²⁸ Focusing on their actions as an implicit demand to change United States foreign policy in Central America, the declaration highlighted the parish's commitment "as a public witness to our government to cease arming nations and urge negotiations to settle the long-standing problems plaguing the people of Central America."²⁹ Again, the first declarations made by Detroit Sanctuary, both MICAH's and St. Rita's, focused on the actions of people making the commitment to Sanctuary as an expression of their goal of changing United States foreign policy.

²⁶ "Public Declaration for the Detroit Sanctuary Project: Send-Off for Salvadoran Family Inauguration of Project", Statement by the Detroit Sanctuary Project, 22 March 1983; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5.

²⁷ "Public Declaration for the Detroit Sanctuary Project: Send-Off for Salvadoran Family Inauguration of Project", Statement by the Detroit Sanctuary Project, 22 March 1983; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5.

²⁸ Announcement of St. Rita's declaration as a public sanctuary, Letter from the Detroit Sanctuary Project to Lois Leonard, 12 December 1983; Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder "Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85."

²⁹ Ibid.

They did not, in the beginning declarations or publicity efforts, draw lines connecting Detroit and Central Americans economically or generate individual empathy with human suffering.

Over time, MICAH and Detroit Sanctuary shifted to explicitly connect the city they all worked and lived in and the international issues that so deeply moved them. Connections they had seen all along but did not highlight. MICAH forums provided an opportunity to bring a range of local issues to public discussion and education. Forums, such as “Community Response to the Drug Crisis: A North/South Dialogue” and “Solidarity Across Borders: Supporting the Rights of Guatemalan Workers,” directly tapped into common issues for Central America and Detroit: drugs and labor. While Detroit “struggl[ed] to break its addiction to drugs” Central and South America “strived to conquer its dependence on drug profit.” Though different sides of the relationship, drugs scarred both communities.³⁰ When Maria Teresa Tula—from the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Prisoners, the Disappeared and the politically assassinated of El Salvador (CO-MADRES)—visited Detroit, the flyer advertising her presentations directly connected Salvadoran violence to violence in the city of Detroit, providing evidence that these seemingly different and geographically far-apart worlds could learn from each other.³¹ International realities were, as the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition argued, perhaps not so far away after all.

As Detroit experienced growing economic and racial inequality into the 1980s and local people increasingly encountering their own unmet needs, the Detroit Sanctuary

³⁰ Flyers for MICAH Forums; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 5, Folder 31 “Newsletter and Graphics, MICAH Brochure, 1990-2.”

³¹ Advertisement of Maria Teresa Tula’s Visit, Letter from the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition to Ken and Geraldine Grunow, undated; The Personal Records of Ken and Geraldine Grunow.

Coalition's publicity for a new initiative in 1987, Sanctuary Sabbath Sundays, demonstrated their best and most sophisticated efforts to make connections between suffering Detroiters and suffering Central Americans. The Detroit Sanctuary Coalition organized these Metro-Detroit wide events, to spread awareness and recommit to solidarity with Central Americans while recognizing they all lived in a city facing its own crises.³² Two major themes emerged to publicize Sanctuary Sabbath Sundays. Sanctuary's supporters drew on the legacy of the Underground Railroad, with its direct reference to the black freedom struggle from slavery, toward freedom from economic and racial oppression.³³ Second, the rhetoric of Sanctuary Sundays paired the "devastation in El Salvador" to "the devastation in [people's] own cities and lives."³⁴ Discussed internally, the Detroit Sanctuary used these themes repeatedly in letters gathering support and participation in this one-day event.³⁵ Sanctuary Sabbath Sundays exemplified the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition's effort to connect Detroiters and Central Americans, by pairing devastation at home and abroad.

During an in-depth interview with the *Detroit Free Press* concerning Sanctuary, Kate Carter, a MICAH staff member, and Gladys Gates, St. Rita's Parish Council member, similarly emphasized to Detroiters their connection to Central Americans through both economic and spiritual suffering. Gates, an African American Detroit, compared their plight to cancer, picturing her fight on behalf of Central Americans as the

³² The first occurred on 8 November 1987, Flyer for "Sanctuary Sabbath Sunday" 8 November 1987; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5.

³³ "Report from Sanctuary Sunday Subcommittee," undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5.

³⁴ "Report from Sanctuary Sunday Subcommittee," undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5.

³⁵ For internal documents including meeting minutes discussing the project, drafts for advertizing, and letters inviting congregations and organizations to participate see Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 6, Folder 5 and 6.

same fight she waged against inequality at home. Carter stressed Detroit's economic impoverishment and the ways deindustrialization had caused a decline in city resources, even as the U.S. gave military aid to El Salvador's oppressive government and to other Central American dictators. In the end, it was the simple human connection that linked Americans and the refugees most powerfully. Gates and Carter asked, "If your sister was being raped or your brother was being blown away, what would you do?" For Carter, the answer was clear. She helped grass-roots efforts to organize the local Sanctuary movement, recruiting St. Rita's to advocate declaration of Detroit as a Sanctuary City, established by its first African-American Mayor, Coleman Young.³⁶ The *Detroit Free Press* reported that Gates ultimately "reduc[ed] [Sanctuary] to a simple human formula."³⁷ In my interview with Kate Carter, she echoed her 1987 statement to me that Detroit Sanctuary tried "to make connections between racism and poverty and violence in both places." She and others did their best to call attention to the structural issues that generated racism and "make connections between institutions that promote or are inherently racist."³⁸ Detroit Sanctuary activists like Kate Carter and others understood the racial and economic conditions of their city. Over time Detroit Sanctuary activists demonstrated, with increasing clarity and sophistication, the interrelationship of economic and individual human suffering between Detroit and Central America.

Challenging Assumptions: Detroiters Learn to Work with Central Americans

People committed to solidarity with Central America also faced other personal challenges when they began to work with Central Americans to whom they had offered

³⁶ "Sanctuary: Detroiters join movement for Latin American refugees," *Detroit Free Press*, 25 October 1987; The Personal Records of Phyllis Livermore.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

sanctuary. Raul and Valeria had first-hand experience with the dirty wars in Central America. The former understood their situation as part of the Sanctuary movement in complex ways that proved more difficult to communicate to members of the movement, for whom Sanctuary began as an abstract political issue that required abstract responses falling under the rubric of working for “justice.” I argue that working with Raul and Valeria caused an internal shift in Sanctuary workers from relating to the Central American couple in terms of sympathy to empathy.

Detroit Sanctuary workers had not expected the Central Americans they were housing to be educated, middle class, and independent-minded. Their assumption that Salvadoran refugees would be “wards” in some sense, who would need constant support and direction, created misunderstanding and friction that culminated in Raul and Valeria’s leaving the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition for a period.³⁹ Phyllis Livermore, remembers Raul’s first presentation to the group, which underscored not only his intelligence and knowledge, completely evident even through the translator, and it immediately impressed her:

I was very taken with them. I was surprised by the fact that they were like middle class people. They were not peasants. I don’t know if I was expecting them to be peasants but I was not expecting them to be so well educated and so well spoken. Raul was a teacher at the high school level...and Valeria was a pediatric nurse. And I thought they were really beautiful people.⁴⁰

Well-educated, middle-class Salvadorans, Raul and Valeria were politically acute and well-informed about Salvadoran-U.S. relations. They spoke about their experiences in political terms, as well as with the language faith, religion, and morality.

³⁹ Letter from Raul Gonzalez to the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition, 5 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

⁴⁰ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

Unfortunately, some well-meaning Sanctuary activists thought they could direct Raul and Valeria's lives. But Raul and Valeria resisted being instructed by MICAH, the Detroit Sanctuary Project, or any other 'North American' organizing body.⁴¹ They had their own ideas and goals from years of education and first hand experience in their own country and in making the decision to be part of the Sanctuary movement rather than go underground or seek asylum in Canada. Eventually they founded their own organization to coordinate Central American refugees in Michigan (CORESAM).⁴² Operating independently, Raul played an important role in statewide, regional, and national Sanctuary coordination. He also supported Salvadoran organizations such as CO-MADRES and UNADES (Building with the Voiceless).⁴³ This initial mismatch between unconscious expectations and the unexpected reality proved a serious challenge to the people working with Raul and Valeria and forced them to reevaluate their assumptions, actions, and relationship with the couple.

In 1986, Raul and Valeria decided to leave the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition. A letter Raul wrote to the Detroit Sanctuary Committee cited a clash of egos, occasional paternalism, the unconscious expressions of colonialism, as well as what Raul termed "immediatism" and "individualism."⁴⁴ Feeling their own time was being wasted, the Central Americans left these problems to be worked out by Coalition members. In the interim, The Gonzalezes continued to live at St. Rita's and speak in the Metro-Detroit

⁴¹ Letter from Raul Gonzalez to the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition, 5 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

⁴² Letter from Raul Gonzalez to the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition, 5 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

⁴³ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

⁴⁴ Raul did not define "immediatism" and "individualism" but seemed to imply a theme of impatience among some people involved in Detroit Sanctuary and a desire to act individually as opposed to gathering collective consensus, see Letter from Raul Gonzalez to the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition, 5 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

community as well as run their own organization CORESAM. Though they would return, Raul's accusations hurt and confused many individuals. In meetings following the receipt of Raul's letter, Coalition members took stock of their feelings, which included "sadness, hostility, anger, resentment," a sense that Raul's letter was arrogant, and sympathy and understanding with the couple, including a realization that "paternalism... was involved."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Coalition members acknowledged the need to address the problems Raul had raised, and committed themselves to work together more effectively while recognizing the assumptions that produced the tension and discord.

As individuals reflected on the challenges posed by Raul and Valeria, they acknowledged a range of preconceived notions that led to the misunderstanding. Implicitly, some individuals expected to help a poor and downtrodden family. They had to learn, instead, to work with Raul and Valeria, their social, economic, and intellectual equals. As a group, the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition admitted that they saw themselves as activists and refugees as "passive recipients:" because they were the ones taking risks to offer help they viewed the refugees as passive recipients, obscuring all the political activism against violent dictatorships in their own countries that led to their refugee status in the first place.⁴⁶ Reflecting on what she learned working with Detroit Sanctuary, Cathey DeSantis recalled how she learned to see the people she was helping as equals.⁴⁷ Activist Kate Carter repeatedly recalled the importance of creating a "just relationship" with people. She mused on the differences between charity and justice:

Some tend toward charity some justice. I think we need to do both. Its a balancing act that played out when Raul and Valeria felt that they were the object of charity

⁴⁵ Detroit Sanctuary Coalition Meeting Notes, 19 November 1986; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Records, Box 3, Folder 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, 6 November 2012

when wanted to be in just relationship. They didn't see themselves as a charity case and said we want our own say. We are human beings. That plays out everywhere between men and women, poor and rich. When invited into a just relationship you have to figure out that relationship. There's solidarity in a just relationship. Not doing for but with. Something to strive for and figure out.⁴⁸

Working with Raul and Valeria, the Detroit community learned about true solidarity and just relationships. I will return to the importance of solidarity in greater depth in Chapter three, but in its essence solidarity meant joining in someone else's fight for justice. Kate and others learned that solidarity meant a relationship of equals working toward a mutual goal. Raul and Valeria did not want or need Sanctuary workers sympathy, well-meaning as it was. Nor would they tolerate unconscious paternalism. Rather, sanctuary workers learned to have empathy for the suffering of the people of Central America. They came to appreciate Raul and Valeria's independence and efforts to improve their home, which would always be El Salvador.

***Detroit Sanctuary Comes to a Close:
Shifting Attention from Crisis Abroad to Crisis at Home***

As the Detroit Sanctuary movement came to a close, many still involved shifted their attention to the injustices within their own city. By the end of the 1980s, Bill O'Brien, champion of Central American Solidarity, decided to shift his energies toward improving conditions within Detroit through community organizing.⁴⁹ Currently, he is the Founder and Director of the Harriet Tubman Center and Director of Community Partnerships at Southwest Solutions.⁵⁰ Similarly Tom Goddeeris, who like Bill, grew up in Detroit, turned his focus to the housing crisis and community development. Tom, partially motivated by the immense difficulties in challenging the U.S. government's

⁴⁸ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

⁴⁹ Bill, O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012.

⁵⁰ See <http://tubmanorganizing.org/staff/bill-obrien>

foreign policy, Tom has discovered that demanding changes in domestic policy on behalf of community-focused work produces parallel frustrations.⁵¹ As the Executive Director of the Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation, he lobbies to influence city policies a goal that depends on state and government agencies that structure the Metro-Detroit landscape, which often hamper change at the community level.

Cathey DeSantis grew up on the East Side of Detroit amidst racial violence; as a young white resident of the city, the structural racism was invisible to her. A participant in Detroit Sanctuary from its beginnings, Cathey became close friends with the Gonzalez family. Responding to what she learned from Sanctuary, Cathey acknowledged that “previous to that experience [she] believed the U.S. would never be involved with something like that [in Central America].” However, her “naivety left pretty quickly” to the point where she “question[s] almost everything” including the city government in which she grew up.⁵² Working with Detroit Sanctuary helped her see, with greater clarity, the pervasive racism there. The structural changes that caused Detroit’s increasing economic and racial injustice, its own urban crisis, that had been obscured in her childhood became evident, once she challenged her own government. Since Sanctuary, Cathey has continued to live and work in Detroit, dedicated to serving her city’s residents in an area not far from where she grew up.⁵³

Conclusion

While Detroit continued to lose its population base and declined economically, Sanctuary workers called attention to economic and individual human suffering they

⁵¹ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

⁵² Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, 6 November 2012.

⁵³ Ibid.

argued connected Central Americans and Metro-Detroit residents. The initial public declarations by the Detroit Sanctuary Project and St. Rita's parish did not make these connections between Detroit and Central America's economic problems and personal suffering, rather the early focus was on the personal risks of challenging injustice. Over time and while learning to work with Raul and Valeria in true solidarity, their public expression of Detroit Sanctuary events made increasingly sophisticated arguments, pairing Central American and Detroit devastation in both economic and human terms. The Sanctuary movement helped Detroit activists recognize injustices within their own city in greater clarity. Despite deep and sincere commitments to Central American solidarity work, many Detroit Sanctuary workers shifted their attention to Detroit and work that addressed issues in their own city they had seen as interconnected all along.

IMAGES OF DETROIT SANCTUARY



Figure 1: Raul and Ernesto Gonzalez next to the "Freedom Train" van (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 2: The Gonzalez family next to the "Freedom Train" van (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 3: The 'Freedom Train' van (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 4: The Gonzalez family being interviewed on their way into Detroit via “The Freedom Train” (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 5: Parishioners and Sanctuary Supporters gather on the steps of St. Rita's (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 6: Father John Nowlan celebrates mass at St. Rita's after the Gonzalez family arrival (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 7: A group of religious sisters, Sanctuary Supporters, raise their hands during mass at St. Rita's (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 8: Singers accompany mass at St. Rita's (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 9: Raul Gonzalez (on the right) playing guitar (courtesy of Larry Cohen)

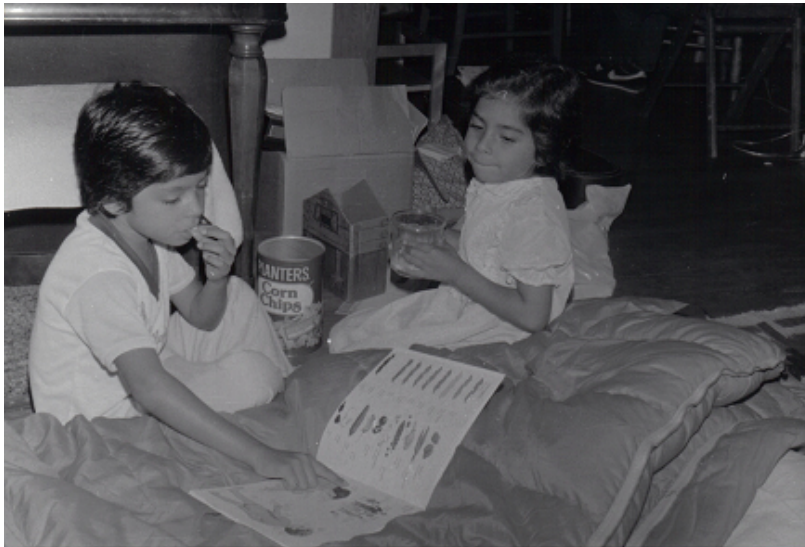


Figure 10: Ernesto and Liliana Gonzalez (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 11: Valeria Gonzalez with her son Ernesto (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 12: Ernesto Gonzalez after arriving at St. Rita's Parish (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 13: The Gonzalez family inside St. Rita's in Detroit, MI (courtesy of Larry Cohen)



Figure 14: The Gonzalez family with Sanctuary Supporters (courtesy of Larry Cohen)

CHAPTER THREE

THESE ARE MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS

“Beyond the simple offering of a safe place, the tradition of sanctuary is a statement of belief. Today, the declaration of sanctuary is a potent statement of one’s belief in and commitment to the entire human family.”
~ Phyllis Livermore¹

Larry Cohen, the Detroit Sanctuary Project’s first Co-Director, had this to say during our conversation: “It’s important to realize those involved in this movement feel compelled by their faith and their consciences to do what they are doing.”² Detroit Sanctuary brought together people of varying faith, non-faith, and political perspectives who became committed to justice in Central America. They did not fit neatly into the political left, rather they were mostly everyday Detroit residents who came to care and see themselves in solidarity with Central Americans. Compassionate, often deeply religious, people realized their own responsibility for violence and suffering caused, in part, by their own government.

If most Sanctuary workers did not readily see themselves in political terms what motivated them to join the National Sanctuary Movement and challenge their government? How did they articulate their motivations? Deeply held personal, religious, and moral convictions led them to work in solidarity with Central Americans. They understood that the United States government was actively undermining the efforts of Central Americans to achieve their own human rights. Solidarity meant doing what they could to end human rights violations in Central America. Detroit Sanctuary workers saw

¹ Introductory remarks by Phyllis Livermore to the to the United Methodist Congregation in Detroit, undated. Personal Files of Phyllis Livermore. Birmingham, Michigan.

² Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 30 November 2012.

themselves as part of this large human family. They reasoned Central Americans' cause affected everyone; once this became true there was no choice but to do what they could. Echoing labor unions with their call to solidarity, injustice to one was injustice to all. During this time, participants came to see that many issues—local, national, and international—were interconnected.

Before Sanctuary: Religiously Based Central American Solidarity in Detroit

Until Raul and Valeria joined their work through the Sanctuary Movement, individuals in Detroit's Central American Solidarity Community worked from their hometown, on behalf of the people of Central America. In the process of becoming a Jesuit priest, Bill O'Brien committed himself to this Central American solidarity work in the United States while living and working in Guatemala.³ He recalled watching the television coverage during the aftermath of the Spanish embassy bombing, in January of 1980, which had been taken over by indigenous leaders to raise awareness of their issues. He saw the charred remains being removed from the building: they "looked like chicken wings when you dropped them in a charcoal fire," he recalled.⁴ It was a transformative moment, in which he decided he must help "stop this kind of stuff."⁵ Returning to his room with the images in his head he remembered experiencing a profoundly "religious moment, kind of a like a conversion."⁶ There he decided there to "go back to the United States and fight the most powerful country in the world who was causing [the] poverty,"⁷ and destruction he witnessed daily. Bill returned with this vow, bound in his memory of

³ Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012. Jesuit priests are members of the religious order The Society of Jesus. They have a more extensive training and formation process than other orders see <http://www.jesuit.org/join/>

⁴ Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

the fiery deaths of the Salvadoran students and peasants, to Detroit and co-founded the Michigan Interfaith Committee on Central American Human Rights (MICAH).

MICAH joined growing numbers of people and organizations who expressed their concern for injustice around the world in terms of human rights, which had political implications. Some in the organization, Larry Cohen, for example, understood from the beginning that framing issues in terms of human rights was inevitably political. Rather than simply a human rights group, according to Larry, MICAH truly was a “revolutionary solidarity group.”⁸ MICAH organizers believed with utter sincerity that Central American governments who were “repressive to their people, causing death, impoverishment on behalf of a small number of wealthy” was a “concern that church people out to be concerned about.”⁹ How to translate these convictions about Central America into public and political expression was the challenge.

As a religious solidarity group, MICAH’s philosophy focused on their responsibilities as people of faith and United States citizens. From its beginnings MICAH, the organization that began Detroit’s involvement with the Sanctuary movement, expressed its dedication to join Central Americans fight for their own human rights and to “develop a community of concern” in Detroit to “support and encourage a growing number of people and groups who respond faithfully to our brothers and sisters, the poor of Central America, in their hopes for human rights.”¹⁰ A response of faith, MICAH sought to “celebrate publically [their] faith, [their] hopes and [their] demands for

⁸ Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 30 November 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Report on MICAH 1982”; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 3, Folder 37.

peace and justice” as they worked in solidarity with Central Americans fighting to achieve their own human rights.

At the core of MICAH’s reasoning was the religious and political principles highlighted by prophet in the Bible: Micah verses 6:8 and 4:3.¹¹ First and foremost, MICAH as an organization acted on the prophet’s directive to “act justly, to love tenderly, to walk humbly with your God.” Moreover, MICAH identified Latin American Christian Base Communities as a source of inspiration for their work and commitment.¹² The God of MICAH had a master plan that included “the liberation of all people from unjust and sinful structures.”¹³ In addition to faith-based motivation, MICAH seamlessly interwove the “original values on which our nation was founded.”¹⁴ Speaking out against United States policy MICAH turned the Declaration of Independence against United States policies they saw violating its principles and Central Americans own war against a destructive government:

We believe that all people in all nations are created equal and have the right to life, liberty, and justice and that when (as was stated in our own Declaration of Independence) any government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the right of that people to alter or abolish it and to institute in its place a new government which will better serve those rights.¹⁵

¹¹ “This is what God asks of you, only this:/to act justly, to love tenderly, /to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) and “They shall beat their swords into plowshares,/and their spears into pruning hooks./Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,/neither shall they learn war any longer. (Micah 4:3)”, “MICAH Statement of Philosophical Principles,” undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 “Structure, Goals, Misc, 1983-88.”

¹² Christian Base Communities were the core part of Liberation Theology’s analysis and efforts to change structures impoverishing millions of Latin Americans, for a summary and analysis of the history of liberation theology in the Latin American context see Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, (Chicago 1991).

¹³ “MICAH Statement of Philosophical Principles,” undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 “Structure, Goals, Misc, 1983-88.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

MICAH pushed the boundaries of the Declaration's own words to include "all people in all nations."¹⁶ The organization saw itself clearly fulfilling the United State's "original values" which policies supporting repressive governments in Central America, they argued, violated. For MICAH and its supporters every person regardless of nationality deserved the "opportunity to live in dignity."¹⁷

MICAH's philosophy and work, done by "people of faith and citizens of the United States," clearly demonstrate how the organization naturally intertwined faith and politics.¹⁸ MICAH, as a religiously based solidarity group, set the philosophical stage for Detroit Sanctuary workers to similarly challenge United States policy as people of faith, religious and non-religious, and citizens who believed in their country's stated ideals. Rooted in the language of faith, human rights, and citizenship, MICAH's goals and philosophy resonated with area churchgoers, compassionate people who would otherwise have been put off by the 'revolutionary' or 'leftist' language of other Detroit based secular organizations.¹⁹ MICAH's philosophy and directive set the stage for Sanctuary in Detroit, which similarly reached out to previously untapped communities.

In the Face of Injustice: Motivations to Challenge the Law and U.S. Government

Relatively racially and economically homogeneous, individuals brought to the group a diverse array of personal experiences, religious, and political motivations to the

¹⁶ "MICAH Statement of Philosophical Principles," undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 "Structure, Goals, Misc, 1983-88."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "MICAH Statement of Philosophical Principles," undated; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 "Structure, Goals, Misc, 1983-88."

¹⁹ For example, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which later became the Central American Solidarity Committee, see Bill O'Brien, conversation with author, 21 November 2012 and Larry Cohen, conversation with author 30 November 2012.

table in planning meetings at St. Rita's.²⁰ Kate Carter, Ken Grunow, and Geraldine Grunow, for example, located their values in early memories of their family and religious upbringing. Kate saw her roots within her family who "taught her to live with an eye for others." From a young age Kate witnessed her mom organize "food co-ops before food co-ops existed" and her dad struggle with decisions about strikes as a union member of the telephone company.²¹ Ken and Geraldine both understood their belief in human rights and work for Central America having its earliest roots in their Catholic upbringing. Remembering his Catholic education, Ken recalled the story of someone working in Africa and speaking at his school. The story stuck in a "primordial" way.²² Larry Cohen drew his core motivation from his Jewish upbringing. In addition, the difficult process of coming out as gay during the 1970s gave him empathy for the marginalized and a deep personal motivation to do the work.²³ Phyllis Livermore's moral conviction prompted her response to injustice, once made clear. Though Sanctuary "technically [broke the law]" Phyllis, explained "I saw it as morally wrong for it to be illegal and it was screaming out for moral justice for taking a moral stand." Not religious belief, but "moral obligation" brought her to Sanctuary.²⁴ Thus, people's deep personal convictions rooted their Central American Solidarity work and would provide the background to take the next step to challenge their government by participating in the Sanctuary Movement.

By joining the National Sanctuary Movement, the Detroit Central American Solidarity community transported experiences like Bill O'Brien's in Guatemala to Detroit

²⁰ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

²¹ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

²² Ken Grunow, conversation with the author, 28 October 2012. Ken and Geraldine would later meet in West Africa and eventually marry; Ibid.

²³ Larry Cohen, conversation with the author, 5 December 2012.

²⁴ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

itself. Sanctuary connected the personal and political when people met and worked with Central Americans themselves, mainly Raul and Valeria, who were crucial to creating this sense of intimate knowledge. Reflecting on the work of Sanctuary Tom Goddeeris explained the practical effectiveness of Sanctuary in moving average caring people to be concerned about a political issue:

Sanctuary was a really powerful tool for reaching a lot of people who would not have seen themselves like me, part of a political left, much more mainstream goodhearted people who would not see themselves as political but once they got the stories became very personalized and could understand US policies on a personal level. It was a very good tool for reaching people and organizing.²⁵

The essence of Sanctuary, providing refuge for people whose lives were truly threatened moved people and Tom understood this. Statistics and abstract claims, simply could not compare to human contact; people could not deny the words and scars of a person in front of them. Thus, Sanctuary reached and motivated a much wider audience when Raul and Valeria lived in Detroit, interacting with Metro-Detroiters on a daily basis. Knowing Raul and Valeria motivated Sanctuary workers, despite immense obstacles. Cathey explained it was easy to feel “helpless in the face of it all, all the money and knowing what it was creating” but “see[ing] the *faces* of real live people who were the victims of that garbage, that was motivation enough.” Like Bill in Central America, peoples’ encounter with Raul and Valeria, Salvadorans who had experienced violence directly, motivated them to take any action available.

Phyllis Livermore and Cathey DeSantis developed personal relationships with the Gonzalez family that gave them immense courage. Both women considered the Sanctuary movement deeply personal because of working with the Gonzalez family and

²⁵ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

consequently becoming close friends over time.²⁶ United States policies that affected their friends, rather than being abstract and unconnected to their lives, were their business. The personal existed inextricably with the political as these women and others faced the reality that their government contributed to the violence in their friends' home: El Salvador. Despite the immensity of the opposition, knowing the family kept Cathey DeSantis and others going.²⁷

The personal melded easily with the political. The personal dedication of activists to Detroit Sanctuary and the National movement had profound political implications that also drew people into the fold. Tom Goddeeris was already a political organizer when he joined the Detroit Central American Solidarity. His "radicalization" began at a relatively young age. Tom's older siblings' involvement in the political 1960s predisposed him to action. He began in high school with environmental issues. In college he read Noam Chomsky, which produced feelings of outraged.²⁸ While studying architecture at the University of Michigan he worked on apartheid divestment, and when he returned to Detroit he joined Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), later the Central American Solidarity Committee (CASC), before becoming involved in Detroit Sanctuary.²⁹

Detroit Sanctuary was especially adept at bringing together faith and political action. Though a minority opposed St. Rita's commitment to Sanctuary as a church, most saw it as an essentially religious act. Kate Carter acknowledged a strong belief "in the

²⁶ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012. Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, 6 November 2012.

²⁷ Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, 6 November 2012.

²⁸ Tom did not specify any particular book; Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

²⁹ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

separation of church and state but as a people of faith there's a tension there."³⁰ She understood those who opposed the Church's involvement with Sanctuary because of its political nature, but there were others who knew it "was the thing to do that by our baptism we are called to clothe the naked and feed the hungry... to be hospitable even in the face of danger."³¹ Kate found many who agreed with her and said "this is who the church is. This is who we are." She explained there are "situations that challenge us to do the right thing...there is a political sophistication in saying we need to challenge the government and the church can be a safe space to do so."³² Involving the church in Sanctuary, I would argue, created a great deal of soul searching and healthy discussion that brought people together and enabled them to agree to disagree.

Kate Carter discovered that her faith did inform her politics, perhaps because of her need to be in ethical relationships with real people:

I would identify with progressive theology that says that our work relating to the gospel is much more connected to community and global issues than privatized and separate. Our baptism calls us to be with and for others. Some think that faith is a private thing between us and God. I have a bigger view of that. I think it's more our relationship with God invites us to be in relationship with others and connected than privatized. That gets played out in how and what people do.³³

Living in relationship with others played out in the steps that took Kate from working with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) to MICAH and Detroit Sanctuary. She called her response a "personal gospel call" and saw her experiences to that point as inevitably personal and political:

Personally this is a gospel call for me. I grew up with a family who taught me to live with an eye for others. I saw my attraction to JVC as the next thing, a way for me to participate in something larger than myself and it introduced me to a variety

³⁰ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

³¹ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

of issues, Central America, women in the church, Gay and Lesbian perspectives. In that environment I began learning about Central America's relationship with our government from religious people coming back and learning this is a political situation that has a gospel call. My response was motivated by faith... I came from a faith background and still am... It was both [personal and political] and not one or the other.³⁴

Faith and belief came first, but led her inevitably to politics. Like for many, her beliefs placed her on the left of the political spectrum.

***What Is Being Done in My Name?:
Sanctuary Workers Response as Citizens in the Cold War Framework***

Detroit Sanctuary worker's personal experience, faith-based, and political motivations culminated in a self-conscious responsibility to hold their government accountable to the ideals it claimed to stand for and they believed in deeply. Meeting Raul and Valeria and hearing their stories, as well as others from Central America, demonstrated to people, as Tom Goddeeris described, that the United States' support for Central American regimes was "violating human rights in the name of human rights."³⁵ Sanctuary workers learned, Tom said, that "what our government was doing in Central America was not about supporting democracy and human rights."³⁶ However, Reagan's public relations machine effectively deceived the United States public.³⁷ Part of sanctuary's work then was to show the contradictions of the United States negative involvement in Central America. In a poignant moment of our conversation Phyllis again read the words of a Salvadoran from a talk she gave many times thirty years ago to demonstrate the violence occurring in El Salvador:

³⁴ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

³⁵ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013. For an analysis of President Reagan's effective public relations efforts see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 249-56.

‘I worked on the hacienda over there, and I would have to feed the dogs bowls of milk or bowls of meat every morning, and I could never put those on the table for my own children. When my children were ill, they died with a nod of sympathy from the landlord. But when those dogs were ill, I took them to the veterinarian in Suchitoto. You will never understand violence or nonviolence until you understand the violence to the spirit that happens from watching your children die of malnutrition.’³⁸

As United States citizens, Sanctuary workers felt, in part, responsible for such examples of egregious violence since their government supported the Salvadoran government, militarily and financially.

Because Sanctuary workers, like Cathey DeSantis and Phyllis Livermore, believed their country stood for the ideals it proclaimed, many reacted with disbelief to such knowledge about United States supported violence. Cathey recalled her own disbelief:

I believed the United States would never be involved with something like that. My naivety left pretty quickly to the point where I question almost everything. Is that really what’s going on? You’re pretty sure there’s always a back-story they’re not telling. There’s way more to it. It’s more than a suspicion it’s a belief that we’re involved around the world in issues we’re not proud of.³⁹

Knowledge that “we [as United States citizens] were responsible for what was happening down there” altered people like Cathey DeSantis’s view of her country.⁴⁰ Like Cathey, Phyllis Livermore struggled as well:

It was just so unbelievable to me that people in our government did not know what was really happening and I think they did but they didn’t want the American people to know because then they couldn’t continue to fund these governments like in El Salvador...It blew my mind. They really knew.⁴¹

Once past their own disbelief, the apparent hypocrisy of United States policies pushed Phyllis and Cathey DeSantis to tell their communities what was really going on. Detroit

³⁸ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

³⁹ Cathey DeSantis, conversation with author, 6 November 2012.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Sanctuary workers, therefore, considered their actions to be upholding the ideals and values of the United States and the purpose of their work to hold their government accountable to its stated ideals.

Though Detroit Sanctuary workers thought of themselves as patriots upholding the ideals of their nation, the effects of Cold War ideology inclined people to be skeptical of Detroit Sanctuary's claims about the United State's role in causing such unbelievable violence in Central America. Phyllis recognized and experienced the effects of Cold War ideology on foreign policy and public opinion. After recalling the disbelief that policy makers "really knew what was going" she acknowledged that a "Cold War mentality" permeated policymaker's and popular opinion about Central and Latin America, as well as all international relations. Phyllis personally experienced the Cold War's influence on the American public. After a co-speaking engagement with Valeria, a man told her "people like that"—implying Valeria—were "communists."⁴² Though speechless in the moment she wished later she had responded, "I'm a communist too, if they are."⁴³ The Cold War influenced not only the foreign policy of Reagan's Administration but personal interactions and efforts of Detroit Sanctuary to reveal the contradictions between American values—of democracy, freedom, and human rights—and the violent destruction of human life in Central America supported by United States aide.

***One Human Family:
Expanding Central American Solidarity in a Human Rights Framework***

Rather than viewing the world within a Cold War framework, and more than only a response to their state's actions contradicting its values, Detroit Sanctuary workers saw

⁴² Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

⁴³ Ibid.

their work and role within the world in an era of expanding human rights. Tom Goddeeris viewed sanctuary as a matter of “basic human rights” and being the “right thing to do.”⁴⁴ Kate Carter similarly claimed Sanctuary “was addressing a human rights issue” and viewed people’s actions as a human rights based response to the reality that “Our government was creating unsafe places in El Salvador.”⁴⁵ Thus, Sanctuary workers, Kate asserted had to “create a safe place because [the government] didn’t.” In addition, for Phyllis Livermore Sanctuary “was primarily about human rights.”⁴⁶ For Phyllis human rights was her religion and her commitment flowed from that belief. Detroit Sanctuary workers, clearly, viewed Sanctuary as primarily an issue of human rights.

Geraldine Grunow, a long time supporter of Detroit Central American solidarity organizations and Sanctuary, expressed a broad belief in human rights that expanded beyond national borders. Based originally in Catholicism, for her the work “had to make sense to [her]” as an individual.⁴⁷ She knew that she “[didn’t] want people to suffer” and she “want[ed] things to be equitable.”⁴⁸ Going further, Geraldine expressed a sense of concern and responsibility for one “large human family.”⁴⁹ Echoing the work and words of people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi, whom she referenced, she emphasized “this large human family...really has to prosper or nobody will prosper.”⁵⁰ Consequently, the suffering of people everywhere in the world, Central Americans being one group, were her concern and needed her attention and action.

⁴⁴ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

⁴⁵ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

⁴⁶ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

⁴⁷ Geraldine Grunow, conversation with author, conversation with the author, 28 October 2012.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Geraldine Grunow, conversation with author, conversation with the author, 28 October 2012.

Detroit Sanctuary workers saw themselves in solidarity with Central Americans in a mutual commitment to human rights. Paralleling Geraldine’s concern for the entire human family, Tom Goddeeris explained solidarity as believing in the interconnectedness of a collective fight for human rights. Detroit sanctuary workers viewed Central Americans fighting for their own human rights and wanted to stand in support—in solidarity—with the people at the “forefront in the hemisphere trying to create a new kind of democratic just society...the forefront of the struggle for human rights in the world.”⁵¹ People like Tom, who believed in human rights, “were in support of what they were trying to do.”⁵² Drawing on the union concept, Tom explained solidarity: “Labor has the idea of solidarity that unions support one another. If I’m a postal worker but the auto union is striking I shouldn’t cross the line, different job but be in support and don’t cross the picket line.”⁵³ By challenging the United States government from Detroit, Sanctuary workers, similarly committed to human rights, joined in solidarity with the Central American peoples struggle for equality and respect of human rights.

When the Gonzalez family came to Detroit through the Sanctuary Movement, the existing Detroit Central American Solidarity community had to learn to work in solidarity with Raul and Valeria directly rather than from across the world. In Chapter Two I demonstrated the challenges people faced through this process. Near the end of the Sanctuary Project a letter from the Detroit Sanctuary Coalition asking for support of the Gonzalez family reminded Sanctuary supporters they had “made a commitment to support them and to aid their work, not as charity, but as solidarity with the people whom

⁵¹ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

our government was destroying”⁵⁴ Being in solidarity meant they had a responsibility to the Gonzalez family, representative of their responsibility to all Central Americans.

Viewing their work in a human rights framework pushed people from solidarity with Central Americans in particular to a concern for many interconnected issues. Involvement with Detroit Sanctuary helped people see connections between many issues at home and abroad such as the Anti-Nuclear movement, South African divestment, and the Environment. A flyer for a march in Clark Park calling for “Jobs Not Bombs Boycott South Africa, Not Nicaragua” exemplified the self-expressed interconnectedness of many movements in Detroit.⁵⁵ The March combined the issues of the Nuclear Freeze, U.S. Central American Intervention, South African Apartheid, funding jobs, and stopping the deportation and harassment of immigrant workers into one fight that concerned all people.

As I showed in Chapter Two the racial and economic injustice of their own hometown came into sharper relief from working with Detroit Sanctuary and many people shifted their focus to local issues, but not all did nor did they easily. Making connections between issues—coupled with a broad responsibility for the human family—people struggled with the relationship between injustices at home and abroad. Geraldine Grunow, Detroit Sanctuary supporter and long-time Amnesty International volunteer and coordinator in the Metro-Detroit area, asked me “how could I look after you with more care than I could look after children of poor people who are also suffering, suffering

⁵⁴ Letter from Susan Egglely to Detroit Sanctuary Coalition supporters, 27 June 1990; The Personal Records of Phyllis Livermore.

⁵⁵ “Jobs Not Bombs Boycott South Africa, Not Nicaragua” flyer for March in Clark Park, undated; University of Detroit Mercy Library, Carney Latin America Solidarity Archives, Box B29, Folder 1.

worse. How choose?”⁵⁶ Explaining his own shift to local issues and neighborhood organizing, Tom Goddeeris reflected on the interrelationship between local, national, and international issues:

On a personal level I ended up getting involved in neighborhood level organizing [after Central American involvement]. I got frustrated with trying to change these big policies up against these big forces. It wasn't easy and we didn't have a lot of victories and at some point some feeling of I need to do something where the results seem more immediate. So in a way I focused my attention to my neighborhood. I've been doing that for 20 years and I can tell you, you beat your head against the wall there too. Almost come full circle to now because you can't just say I'm only going to look at my little section because it is all related. I'm coming back around to where if you're really going to make improvements in the city you really need changes that are national in scope... You can't retreat into your own little world for very long before realizing all these issues are really connected. It's not easy to figure out how to make the big changes the world needs.⁵⁷

Tom has seen his own work move back toward trying to affect larger citywide policies that affect his neighborhood and make locally only focused change ineffective.

Knowing the Gonzalez family and Detroit Sanctuary dramatically affected the lives of many people involved in personal ways. For instance, Phyllis's life was changed by meeting the group in the parking lot of Adams Square:

Really [Sanctuary played] a tremendous role in a way because I became such good friends, personal friends, with the family. I never worked in Sanctuary in the way the nuns and ministers who helped organize it who were key people in the movement at the national level. I was involved in the monthly meetings at St. Rita's about the families needs and situation and taking a stand publicly as far as the government was concerned. We had demonstration at the INS office. There was a need recognize as political refugees and not economic like the government was trying to say. It really affected my life for its duration. As did that meeting in that parking lot at Adams Square. It changed my life totally.⁵⁸

For Phyllis and others, a philosophy of human rights based solidarity and commitment to justice continued to influence their thought and actions. Chapter Two explained how

⁵⁶ Geraldine Grunow, conversation with author, 28 October 2012.

⁵⁷ Tom Goddeeris, conversation with author, 6 February 2013.

⁵⁸ Phyllis Livermore, conversation with author, 24 November 2012.

work with Sanctuary influenced people's views of their own city: Detroit. Others, like Kate Carter, eventually left Detroit. Although she left the city, Kate would continue to work on "issues of justice and solidarity."⁵⁹ After moving to California she joined a Church that had participated in the Sanctuary Movement. She now works on the issue of mass incarceration in the United States.⁶⁰ Commitments to human rights did not end or necessarily begin with Central America, but understandings grew by participating in Detroit Sanctuary.

Conclusion

Deep personal experiences and beliefs, as moral and religious human beings, gave the Sanctuary workers, with whom I spoke, the courage and language necessary to challenge their government and the powerfully blinding Cold War ideology prevalent in the 1980s. Working within a human rights framework, solidarity with Central Americans affected Detroit Sanctuary workers thoughts and actions long after the Gonzalez family moved from the city. Involvement in Detroit's Central American Solidarity community, specifically Sanctuary, either followed or founded commitments to not just Central America but a broad-based responsibility to care for a larger human family. The commitment to human rights struggles around the world coalesced in the concept of solidarity. Convictions deeply felt, though rooted in different sources, moved people to action and pushed people to reconsider their view of their own city, nation, world and their place in it as ethical human beings.

⁵⁹ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013.

⁶⁰ Kate Carter, conversation with author, 21 January 2013. For an analysis of the historical, social, and economic factors that have contributed to a dramatic increase in the United States' rates of incarceration over the past 40 years see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY: New, 2012.

CONCLUSION

The Legacy of Sanctuary and Solidarity in Metro-Detroit

Jonathan grew up with his mother on the streets of San Salvador, El Salvador's capitol city. While he was serving time for a robbery committed in order to buy food, a gang brutally murdered his girlfriend. Pure rage led him to become a member of an opposing gang without thought of consequence: he was thirteen. After a long struggle and with the help of a program during one of his many stints in prison, Jonathan found the support necessary to leave the gang behind, nearly an impossible act in itself. But Jonathan's past continues to haunt him; he is never able free himself completely of his decision to join a gang, or forget the decision made in rage by his thirteen-year-old self. Indeed the police will not help men like Jonathan move on: the most sadistic of them routinely and without cause pick up young men with gang tattoos, strip them of their shirts, and drop them in enemy territory. Jonathan cannot even walk down his own street without endangering his life.¹

I listened to my friend Amy, recently returned from an immersion trip to El Salvador, recount Jonathan's story. Moved to solidarity by the people she had met, she shared her experiences, pausing at moments when temporarily unable to continue. After the conversation was over, we sat together in silence. Like the sanctuary workers who travelled to Central America and who knew Raul and Valeria in Detroit, her Central American experience has become an unforgettable reality, a reality inextricably personal and political. Amy travelled to El Salvador with the organization Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ). Founded in 1984 in the midst of the Salvadoran war, CRISPAZ has worked to "build bridges of solidarity between the Church of the poor and

¹ Amy Ketner, conversation with author, 21 March 2013.

marginalized communities in El Salvador and communities in the US and other countries through mutual accomplishment, striving together for peace, justice, sustainability, and human liberation.”²

As I have tried to detail and document here, Detroit Sanctuary facilitated a similar encounter between Metro-Detroit residents and Central Americans within their own city from 1983 to 1993. Meeting with and hearing the stories of Raul and Valeria changed people’s lives and views throughout the Metro-Detroit area. These personal encounters and hearing the firsthand stories of individuals deeply affected by U.S. sanctioned violence compelled action. Framing action in terms of defense of “human rights,” Sanctuary workers motivated by faith and moral conscience found the language to enable them to fight tirelessly, to work in solidarity with Central Americans’ defending themselves and their polity from violent regimes.

Detroit was a city that faced its own economic and racial injustices. It is my belief that the awareness of an “urban crisis” at home inspired Sanctuary workers to better understand injustice Central America. Encountering Raul and Valeria, whose autonomy, independence and acute analysis of their own political situation painfully disabused sincere and caring white activists of their unconscious race and colonialist prejudices was an important learning experience for these caring, politically, and religiously-motivated Americans. My informants were sincere in their desire to make the world a better place. Sanctuary workers’ analysis of the problem at hand could not but perceive parallels between the destruction of human life in Central America and the poverty and injustice in their own, beloved city of Detroit. They understood that the massive allocation of government funds to fighting the Cold War in Central America diverted needed resources

² “Our Mission and Values,” <http://www.crispaz.org/mision&values.html>.

from federal programs that might well have stemmed and even reversed the gradual decline of a city once viewed as crucial to America's "arsenal of democracy."

Sanctuary in Detroit demanded not only the safety of the refugees, but radical changes in U. S. policies abroad.³ The shedding of innocent blood would no longer be tolerated. St. Rita's Catholic Parish made public its decision to be a sanctuary for Central American refugees with an inauguration service on December 15, 1983, organized to mark the memory of four U.S. women killed in El Salvador three years earlier.⁴ Like its parent organization, MICAH, the Detroit Sanctuary Project highlighted the biblical imperative, Leviticus 19:33-34, demanding the protection of strangers: "count them as your own people, and love them as yourselves."⁵ The flyer itself displayed an even more emphatic declarative: "Blood Stops Here!"⁶ Detroit Sanctuary workers saw themselves as patriotic citizens holding their government accountable for actions that stood in contradiction to their nation's stated ideals. Indeed, the violence and injustice obscured by Cold War ideology stimulated their own theorization of a clearer and more emphatic human rights framework.

In an era of continued United States military involvement around the world and an increasing gap between rich and poor within our nation, it is imperative that we, as United States citizens, know and understand the deleterious effects of our government's

³ Larry Cohen, conversation with author, 30 November 2012.

⁴ On December 2, 1980 Jean Donovan, Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford were beaten, raped, and murdered by Salvadoran National Guardsmen; From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, <http://www.usip.org/files/file/ElSalvador-Report.pdf> accessed 31 March 2013. The deaths of the four women and Archbishop Romero in San Salvador exemplified the violence against religious in Central America that prompted response by United States citizens, Chasteen *Born in Blood and Fire*, 303-304.

⁵ Detroit Sanctuary Project Mailing, 16 August 1983; Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder "Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85."

⁶ Letter announcing St. Rita's Declaration as a public sanctuary, 15 December 1983. Bentley Historical Library, Episcopal Church, Diocese of Michigan Records, 1830-2001, Box 17, Folder: Latin American Refugee Issues and Peace Movement 1983-85.

domestic and foreign policies. Only knowledge can generate an informed position on the human costs of “*real politiques*.” The Sanctuary Movement, comprised of citizens, people of faith, and individuals who believed in their country’s stated ideals, sought out that knowledge in a variety of ways.

Detroit Sanctuary did not change the city in any fundamental way, nor did it stem the urban crisis, but it did alter forever the lives of the nine people I interviewed, giving them new awareness of injustice abroad and greater insight into injustice at home as they navigated activism within the Metro-Detroit landscape. Struggling with the interconnectedness of local, national, and international issues, they made the abstract political personal. Their existential commitments to justice, a justice they understood to be wholly and incontrovertibly American, led them to search for ways to live ethically in a complicated and often disappointing world. They took seriously, only as religiously and politically *attentive* people can, the ethical dictates they articulated through their activism, laying them out for all who wished to join them, on their Sanctuary Sabbath

Sunday flyers:

I pledge to open my eyes and my heart
through reflection , reading, and responding
to the needs of Salvadoran and Guatemalan people
I acknowledge the connection I have
with these
people as members of the
human family and pledge to discover
how U.S. foreign policy
is affecting
their lives.
I cannot do everything, but I pledge
to do something today to
make life better in my city and my world.
Working together makes change
possible.⁷

⁷ Sanctuary Sabbath Sunday Flyer; Walter P. Reuther Library, Organization in Solidarity with Central America Collection, Box 3, Folder 5 “Detroit Sanctuary Coalition Project 1986-7.”

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