The Bean Tree: Research: The Sanctuary Movement:

The **Sanctuary Movement** was a religious and political campaign that began in the early 1980s to provide safe-haven for Central American refugees fleeing civil conflict. It responded to restrictive federal immigration policies that made obtaining asylum difficult for Central Americans.

At its peak, Sanctuary involved over 500 congregations across the country that, by declaring themselves official “sanctuaries,” committed to providing shelter, material goods and often legal advice to Central American refugees. Various denominations were involved, including the Lutherans, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Quakers, and Mennonites.

Movement members acted in open defiance of federal law, and many prominent Sanctuary figures were arrested and put on trial in the mid and late 1980s. The roots of the movement derive from the right of sanctuary in medieval law and Judeo-Christian social teachings.

Between 1980 and 1991, nearly 1 million Central Americans crossed the U.S. border seeking asylum. Most were fleeing political repression and violence caused by civil wars in [Guatemala](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guatemala) and [El Salvador](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Salvador), though some had fled Nicaragua in the wake of the 1979 [Nicaraguan Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_Revolution). In El Salvador, the military killed over 10,000 people by 1980, including the famous Archbishop [Oscar Romero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Romero) and four U.S. churchwomen. In Guatemala, government-backed paramilitary groups killed 50,000, disappeared 100,000 and perpetrated 626 village massacres. Official policy under the Reagan administration greatly hindered Central Americans from obtaining asylum status, however. Congress forbid foreign aid to countries committing human rights abuses, and it is well documented that the U.S. provided funds, training and arms to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Because admitting these governments' abuses would bar the U.S. from providing further aid, the Reagan administration instead argued that Central Americans were “economic migrants” fleeing poverty, not governmental repression. Consequently, Central Americans stood little chance within the U.S. immigration system, where asylum is granted based on proof of “well-founded fear” of persecution. Just prior to the beginning of the Reagan Administration, Congress had passed the Refugee Act which incorporated this international definition of political asylum into US law - which formerly granted refugee status only to those "fleeing Communism." However, the Reagan Administration retained enormous discretion under the law and used all its power to prevent the legal recognition of Central American claims. And the numbers reflect this. Approval rates for Guatemalans and Salvadorans hovered somewhere under three percent in 1984, as compared to a sixty percent approval rate for Iranians, forty percent for Afghans fleeing Soviet invasion, thirty-two percent for Poles, twelve percent for Nicaraguans escaping the Sandinistas and one-hundred percent for Cubans. In 1983, one Guatemalan was granted asylum in the United States.

Many Central Americans who found their way to the United States were placed in detention centers and sent home. Many protested this move, claiming that they would face severe dangers upon their return. An American Civil Liberties Union study in 1985 reported that 130 deported Salvadorans were found disappeared, tortured, or killed.

Sanctuary formed as a reaction to these policies. As a movement, it originated along the border with Mexico and Arizona, but was also strong in Chicago, Philadelphia, California and Texas. In 1980, Jim Corbett, Jim Dudley, John Fife and a handful of other residents of Tucson, Arizona began providing legal, financial and material aid to Central American refugees. Their decision to do so—and therefore openly oppose federal law—was inspired by a mixture of shocking refugee stories, personal encounter, political sympathies and religious conviction. As Corbett recounts, the tradition of his Quaker faith and its involvement in the Underground Railroad compelled him to take action. Gary Cook, associate pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church in Massillon, Ohio, cited the simple experience of personal interaction: "We're a very conservative group of folks politically. But once we encountered the refugees face to face, we couldn't justify not taking them in.”

For Dudley, one of Corbett's friends, it was his experience coming across a man on the side of the road on the outskirts of Tucson one afternoon. As he described in an interview, after picking up the hitchhiker, Dudley learned through broken Spanish that the man was a Salvadoran attempting to make it to San Francisco. As they drove into town, Border Patrol agents stopped the car and identified the man as an illegal alien and promptly took him away. Dudley recalls the pleading look on the Salvadoran's face and the fear in his voice as he asked Dudley to lie to the patrol agents and tell them he was a friend and that they were going to Tucson together. Dudley left that day troubled and confused. Why was the man so afraid? Were the border agents going to send him back? What would happen to him if they did?

On March 24, 1982, the second anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination, Fife, the Reverend of the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, declared his congregation a public sanctuary. Outside his church he posted two banners that read: “This is a Sanctuary for the Oppressed of Central America,” and “Immigration: do not profane the Sanctuary of God.” A rush of churches, synagogues and student groups across the country followed suit, and by 1985 Sanctuary became a national movement with roughly five hundred member-sites across the United States.

Movement members likened Sanctuary to the "Underground Railroad" of the 19th century: Central Americans would flee their countries, often under extremely dangerous circumstances, travel up through Mexico and eventually find a safe haven in a sanctuary community in the United States or Canada. To give a picture of how this phenomenon worked in practice, refugees coming through Tucson would make it to Nogales (the nearest border town in Mexico), often on foot, and find refuge at El Sanctuario de Nuestra Señora Guadalupe (Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe) Catholic Church. With help from Padre Ramón Dagoberto Quiñones, the head priest at Our Lady, they would travel a short distance across the border to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, whose steeple was visible from across the border in Mexico. There they could find shelter, food, legal advice and perhaps a little money. The two churches kept in constant contact, and priests and lay people traveled frequently between parishes.

Once the refugees found safe-haven in a Sanctuary community, U.S. congregations, student groups and activists often invited Central Americans to share their beliefs and experiences with the community. Refugees were invited to the pulpit to give their testimonies during church services, congregations held special Central American peace nights where stories were shared and information given, and Central Americans and North Americans talked frequently and openly, whether through Bible studies, meetings or rallies. As one congregant of Tucson's Southside Presbyterian Church remembers:

On any given night there might be from two to twenty-five [refugees] sleeping in the church. The congregation set up a one-room apartment for them behind the chapel. When that was full, they slept on foam pads in the Sunday school wing.

Although many associate Sanctuary with Catholics and Quakers, the denominational make-up of the movement was quite diverse. 36% of Sanctuary congregations were Catholic, 22% were Presbyterian, 36% were Quakers, 28% were Unitarian, 2% Jewish, 10% came from university campuses and 1% from seminaries. The following are a sampling of official statements issued by major denominations within the U.S.

Barbara Kingsolver popularized the movement in her 1998 novel The Beans Trees, in which she provides a fictional account of a Sanctuary member housing refugees in her Tucson home.

This movement has been succeeded in the 2000s by the movement of churches and other houses of worship to shelter immigrants in danger of deportation. The New Sanctuary Movement is a network of houses of worship that facilitates this effort. The New Sanctuary Movement allows U.S. Officials in Catholic churches without permission of Catholic officials.

The Sanctuary Movement traced its roots to the ancient Judaic tradition of Sanctuary. As movement member Mary Ann Lundy phrased it, “The idea comes from the original Judeo-Christian concept of Sanctuary, where persons fleeing the law could go to places of worship and be protected.” In the Old Testament, God commanded Moses to set aside cities and places of refuge in Canaan where the persecuted could seek asylum. This concept can also be found in ancient Roman law, medieval canon law and British common law. Movement members also appealed to U.S. history, including the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad of the nineteenth century, the housing of Jews during World War II, the idea of the U.S. as a safe haven for immigrants and the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. For Sanctuary congregations, this provided justification for acting against federal laws, and many members saw themselves as part of a larger transnational community.