

Sanctuary Movement In Spotlight

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — The movement to provide sanctuary in this country for Central American refugees has come to a crossroads, with activists meeting this weekend to discuss whether to turn their loosely organized humanitarian efforts into a pointed political drive.

"It's very much like a kind of cake that has to get baked," said Daniel Sheehan, an attorney with the Christian Institute in Washington, D.C. "The question is, is it baked yet? What kind of cake is it going to be?"

The 3-year-old church-inspired movement that began here has been in the spotlight lately as a result of indictments, trials of movement members and a public symposium last week that attracted more than 1,000 people.

On March 24, 1982, the Southside United Presbyterian Church in Tucson publicly declared itself a sanctuary for Central American refugees.

Since then, an estimated 200 to 250 churches and synagogues from Burlington, Vt. to Berkeley, Calif., and an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Americans have followed suit, opening their doors to people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras whom many believe to be victims of civil war or oppression.

The movement has provided a haven for 2,500 to 3,000 refugees using an "underground railroad" that brings Central Americans through Mexico, a small part of the estimated 500,000 Central Americans now in this country.

The activists say they are providing sanctuary on the premise that international and U.S. laws, including the 1980 Refugee Act, grant legal asylum to refugees who are fleeing political persecution and violence.

But the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Justice Department contend that Central Americans entering this country without documentation do so for economic reasons. Those apprehended face deportation.

In the past two weeks, events have snowballed:

• In Arizona, 18 people were indicted, including six clergy members, on the basis of evidence the government says came through church infiltration by undercover informants and agents using recording devices.

• Religious leaders and groups have attacked the Reagan administration for such tactics and endorsed "the moral rightness of sanctuary."

• The government unsuccessfully prosecuted sanctuary worker Jack Elder in Texas. He faces further charges stemming from his alleged role in the movement.

Until now the movement has been largely grass-roots, involving white, middle-class, religiously committed Americans. But activists were meeting here yesterday and today to wrestle with its evolution.

U.S. economic and military aid to El Salvador and U.S. involvement elsewhere in the region have contributed to the refugee problem, movement members say. As a result, the movement "does take on the tones of becoming a politically motivated action," said Dana Cooper, who was a press spokesman for the symposium.

But Rabbi Joseph Weisenbaum of Temple Emanu-El, site for the symposium, said, "This is not a political game being played by anti-Reagan forces or by Marxists. It's a spiritual response to human needs."

He said, "Whatever happens in the courtroom, they (federal officials) cannot kill an idea."

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