



SF Area Churches May Soon House Illegal Immigrants **20 Christian & Jewish Congregations Plan To Join 'Sanctuary' Movement**

By Joe Vazquez
Reporting

(CBS 5 / AP) SAN FRANCISCO A new immigrant rights movement has been launched nationwide, and soon will involve churches in the Bay Area. Two churches in Los Angeles and three others in New York and San Diego announced Wednesday they will shelter illegal immigrants who are about to be deported as part of a "new sanctuary movement."

About 20 Bay Area Christian and Jewish congregations have indicated they are interested in providing sanctuary to illegal immigrants, according to the Rev. Phil Lawson of the "Interfaith Coalition For Immigrant Rights, " a group that is organizing the movement.

So far, the congregations in the Bay Area and other cities across the country that would participate in the new sanctuary movement have not yet identified themselves publicly. All of them could face legal jeopardy, if federal officials decide to challenge their strategy.

The Rev. Phil Lawson of the Interfaith Coalition says there is plenty of historical precedence for this strategy.

"Down through history, churches have been sanctuaries for people running away from oppression," Lawson said.

Organizers said churches in more than 50 cities nationwide were planning to join the sanctuary effort. They don't believe immigration agents will make arrests inside the churches.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has not tried to arrest Elvira Arellano, an illegal immigrant who has taken shelter at a Methodist church in Chicago since August. Her son is a U.S. citizen and he has lobbied in the Mexican legislature on behalf of families that would be split if parents are deported.

ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice declined to say whether agents would attempt to arrest others who take sanctuary in churches, although she noted agents had the

authority to arrest anyone violating immigration law.

Anti-illegal-immigration groups called the sanctuary effort misguided.

Charles Birkman of the Golden Gate Minutemen says he plans on contacting the congregations, once they are publicized. He says he will confront the congregation leaders about what he calls the misuse of a place of worship.

“I would support them if they had a scriptural basis for what they are doing,” said Birkman. “These same churches are the same churches that are promoting gay marriage. They’re not promoting God’s laws or what is right or wrong. They are promoting a progressive political agenda.”

The sanctuary effort is loosely based on a movement in the 1980s, when churches harbored Central American refugees fleeing wars in their home countries. Organizers of the current movement include members of the Jewish, Muslim, Catholic and other faiths.

Participating churches in San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and New York won't initially house illegal immigrants. Instead, leaders will provide legal counsel, accompany them to court hearings and prepare plans to house them in churches if authorities try to deport them.

The plans come as immigration reform legislation has been stalled since last summer, and tens of thousands of illegal immigrants have been detained and deported in stepped-up immigration raids in recent months.

At Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in downtown Los Angeles on Wednesday, more than 30 priests, pastors, imams and rabbis blessed two illegal immigrants during a raucous ceremony attended by 300 people.

A Mexican man will be sheltered at the church, and another from Guatemala will be housed at San Pablo's Lutheran Church in North Hollywood.

The Guatemalan, a gardener who only gave his first name as Juan, said he worried about what might happen to his young daughters if he was deported.

Both girls are U.S. citizens because they were born in the U.S.

"I want to ask the politicians to see the suffering of the immigrant families," he said.

In New York, churches will be aiding a Haitian man and a Chinese couple who are facing deportation and have children who are U.S. citizens, said Father Juan Carlos Ruiz.

Religious leaders gathered at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Paul the Apostle

said their promise of sanctuary could include financial assistance, legal help and physical protection, if necessary.

"For us, sanctuary is an act of radical hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger who is like ourselves, the stranger in our midst, our neighbors, our friends," said Rabbi Michael Feinberg of the Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition.

Jani, a U.S. citizen who did not give her last name, said her Haitian-born husband, Jean, is facing deportation because of a 1989 drug conviction in the U.S. that put him in prison for 11 years. She said the family would take refuge in a church, if necessary, rather than be separated.

The churches sought immigrants who wanted to take part in the sanctuary movement and were screened to make sure they paid taxes and didn't have criminal backgrounds, said Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, executive director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, an interfaith association spearheading the national plans.

They chose the Haitian man because "his crime was 20 years ago and since then he has totally reformed his life," she said.

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