

LAUNCH OF NEW 'SANCTUARY MOVEMENT' CHURCHES IN 20 CITIES GIVE REFUGE TO UNDOCUMENTED FAMILIES

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May 9, 2007

LOS ANGELES -- Juan Villada's life began to change early one morning in 2002 when immigration authorities knocked on the door of his Inglewood home and arrested him along with three of his four children.

Today, Villada will leave behind his normal life, including his home and his job, to live in Our Lady Queen of Angels Church, "La Placita," and become a symbol of what a coalition of religious leaders has baptized, "the New Sanctuary Movement."

Churches of different denominations in 20 U.S. cities will take in immigrant families who have been previously selected to symbolize the situation of millions who remain in legal limbo. The first wave of sanctuaries was announced today in three U.S. cities, where sanctuary will be given to families who seek refuge there.

"I know we're going to represent millions of people," Villada said in an interview days before seeking refuge in Los Angeles' oldest Catholic church. "We want to let the government know that we are not bad people. (I hope) that they listen to us, because they are doing a lot of unjust things."

This is not the first time a coalition of churches has taken this step. It happened in the 1980s, with Central Americans fleeing wars – primarily Salvadorans and Guatemalans – who were not initially granted legal asylum in this country.

"La Placita" itself was one of the churches that opened its doors and became a sanctuary for hundreds of refugees.

"It was a prophetic movement. We opened our doors to the refugees of wars that our government was supporting. In doing so, we wanted to signal the country to open its doors too," said Father Richard Estrada, who was then the assistant priest at La Placita, which was led by Father Luis Olivares.

Today, Estrada is the head priest, and will welcome Juan Villada into a small apartment that has been set up for him in the old sacristy.

This time, according to its organizers, the "new sanctuary" will be a different version of the same idea. Churches won't open their doors to everyone who is

undocumented or under deportation orders, but will present symbolic cases to mobilize public opinion in favor of immigration reform.

And they won't just be Catholic churches. They will be Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Mennonite.

"Basically, we want to give voice to the 12 million immigrants who are asking to be legalized. They live in this nation, are productive people with roots, and aren't yet accepted as part of this great nation," said Reverend César Arroyo, pastor at the San Pablo Lutheran Church, in North Hollywood, where another Los Angeles family will take refuge.

Churches in New York and Chicago will also become sanctuaries today, and others in San Diego and Seattle announced that they will be next.

Various families have been "recruited" during months of meetings and preparation. The goal is for them to be urgent and representative cases. For example, they should have a deportation order against them, have kids who are U.S. citizens, a solid work record and a viable case under the law.

The coalition has the support of legal consultants and the economic commitment of numerous congregations, along with community organizations. The lawyers have indicated that churches are not violating the law if they make public the names of those they are offering sanctuary to.

Villada, 43, is a case like many others. He came to the country in 1989 for a few months and then went back to Mexico, returning to the United States shortly after with his wife and their two kids, who were born in the city of Guadalajara, Jalisco. They settled in Los Angeles, where their other two children were born.

Villada worked for years, until a jobsite accident in 2001 left him injured. His company refused to hire him with his physical restrictions and, according to Villada, turned him in to immigration authorities, who appeared at his door one day in 2002 at five in the morning.

His oldest son was not home. Neither was his wife, since they had already separated. They took him and his other three children without asking any more questions. Juan Carlos, 17, was handcuffed. The two younger kids, Christian y Brian, who were 10 and 8 years old and are U.S. citizens, were later turned over to a family friend, who passed herself off as their mother to prevent them from ending up in foster care.

After paying a fineposting bail, the man and his second son were released after apparently signing a voluntary departure form. The rest is the usual story of lawyers who charged them and didn't solve anything. In February, they received a letter from immigration authorities with an ultimatum: they should already have

left the country.

In his desperation, he went in search of help at a local immigrant rights organization. There they told him about the plans for a sanctuary and he was the first to sign up.

“We lived as a normal family. We didn’t do any harm to anyone,” said Villada. “At the same time, they’re right when they say we broke the law, but this country is made up of immigrants who only want a better life.”

After years of hopelessness, Juan Villada has the courage to go forward again.

“Sanctuary has its place in the immigration reform movement,” said Father Estrada, pastor of La Placita. “This is our contribution.”