



Churches pressure US Govt to reform immigration laws

Reporter: Kim Landers

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ELEANOR HALL: Churches across the United States have ramped up pressure on politicians to reform the nation's immigration laws.

Over the next few months, 50 churches have promised to publicly defy immigration authorities by harbouring illegal immigrants.

They won't hide the fact that they will be providing such sanctuary, but they say they don't expect immigration agents to make arrests within church walls.

But those religious leaders taking part in the new sanctuary movement are carefully selecting the people they help, as North America Correspondent Kim Landers reports.

KIM LANDERS: There are an estimated 12-million undocumented people in the US, with one million new illegal immigrants arriving each year.

JOSE ANTONIO SANTUARIO: My name is Jose Antonio Santuario (phonetic). "Tengo" (Spanish) 44 years, from Mexico, Guadaljaha Risco (phonetic).

KIM LANDERS: Jose is one of those illegal immigrants. Asking to be identified only by his first name, he's told the ABC he has been in the US since 1989, when he crossed the Mexican border near San Diego.

He has worked and has two American-born sons, aged 11 and 15. But facing deportation, Jose has now taken sanctuary at the Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in downtown Los Angeles.

Construction crews have converted a storage room into a bedroom for him.

JOSE ANTONIO SANTUARIO (translated): We are not terrorists. We are not bad people. We're simply looking for a better future for our families. We're working people. We're human, not animals.

KIM LANDERS: Father Richard Estrada is the priest at this 188-year-old parish. He says the church wants to put a human face to America's very complex

immigration laws.

RICHARD ESTRADA: I think all churches are mandated by, you know, the sacred scriptures of really being on the side of the downtrodden. The immigrants are being persecuted.

KIM LANDERS: Over the next few months, up to 50 churches nationwide will each shelter one illegal immigrant.

So far, US immigration agents haven't arrested a Mexican woman who has been sheltering in a Chicago Methodist church since August, and church leaders don't believe the authorities will make arrests inside other churches.

But Jose knows an immigration raid could happen any day.

JOSE ANTONIO SANTUARIO (translated): Oh, it can happen, we're aware of that. But whatever happens, we'll be here. This is a risk we're willing to take.

KIM LANDERS: Father Estrada is also concerned, but confident too.

RICHARD ESTRADA: You know, we're thinking that that's not going to happen because of bad press, bad publicity, the bad PR it would have for the authorities, immigration to come into sacred ground.

KIM LANDERS: The churches taking part in the new sanctuary movement are carefully selecting the people they help.

The illegal immigrants must be facing deportation, have a good work record and have children who are US citizens by birth.

But some critics say the sanctuary effort is misguided. Jack Martin is from the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favours limits on immigration.

JACK MARTIN: There is no sanctuary policy in US law. They know that there is no legal status that they can accord to people who are deportable by accommodating them in churches.

And actually we think that the activity that they're engaged in, crosses the line into aiding and abetting people who are breaking the law by being in the country illegally.

KIM LANDERS: But Father Estrada doesn't think the church is breaking the law. He says immigration authorities have been told where Jose is.

It's taken nine months for religious leaders from different faiths to agree on this

strategy.

Only yesterday President George W. Bush expressed hope that Democrats and Republicans could reach agreement on a comprehensive immigration bill this year.

This is Kim Landers in Washington for *The World Today*.