



RELIGIOUS LEADERS PLEDGE SANCTUARY TO IMMIGRANTS

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(CBS/AP) NEW YORK Religious leaders from different faiths promised Wednesday to help families who they said are facing deportation because of what they say are immigration laws.

The gathering at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Paul the Apostle on Manhattan's West Side was one of several across the United States billed as the beginning of a new sanctuary movement for immigrants.

"More than 50 times the Hebrew Bible commands us, you shall love the stranger in your midst," said Rabbi Michael Feinberg of the Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition. "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."

The sanctuary effort is loosely based on a 1980s movement when churches harbored Central American refugees fleeing wars in their home countries.

Religious leaders in New York said their support might include physical sanctuary at some point.

"We define the new sanctuary as providing spiritual, moral, sometimes material and sometimes legal assistance to people who are either unjustly detained or deported-- or, God forbid, raided -- and all these things are happening in New York," said the Rev. Donna Schaper of Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village.

The Rev. James Forbes, pastor of the Riverside Church, one of the nation's most prominent liberal Protestant churches, said, "We who are citizens of the United States recognize that although there may be borders and fences, that in the great vision of God we are all God's children."

Two families facing possible deportation attended the news conference.

A Chinese-born restaurant worker who identified himself only as Joe said if he and his wife, Mei, are deported, their two young children could be placed in foster care.

"We do not want our family to be apart," he said.

Jani, a U.S. citizen, said her Haitian-born husband, Jean, is facing a final deportation order because of a 1989 drug conviction in the U.S., although he served 11 years. "He did his time, and here we are in 2007 trying to stay together," she said.

Jani said that rather than be separated, the family would take refuge in a church if necessary.

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 if 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.

The faith groups "don't seem to realize that they are being charitable with someone else's resources, and that's not charity," said Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors limits on immigration.