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New Sanctuary Movement at the border can spiritually transform us

John Fife | Jul. 6, 2012

Jim Marx (red jacket) and Charlie Rooney, volunteers with No More Deaths, carry food and water as they patrol desert trails near the U.S.-Mexico border Jan. 31 in Arivaca Junction, Ariz. (CNS/Jim West)

The situation on the southwestern U.S. border in the 1980s led to a movement of faith communities we called Sanctuary. In 1980 we began to learn that refugees from the death squads, torture and massacres of villages in El Salvador and Guatemala were arriving at the border.

The U.S. government refused to recognize them as refugees; thousands were being arrested, imprisoned and deported in handcuffs back to the death squads, torture, massacres and wars. The church on both sides of the border began to respond in ministry to the needs of the refugees in the ways you would expect -- food, shelter, medical care and legal aid. Church volunteers enabled refugees to apply for political asylum, represented at hearings by lawyers funded by the Tucson Ecumenical Council in Arizona.

But by 1981 we were dismayed to learn that no one from El Salvador or Guatemala was being granted asylum. Our government was in political, military and economic support of the regimes that were ordering the repression. Our allies could not be creating refugees; we were bringing democracy and development to Central America.

My colleague Jim Corbett, a brilliant Quaker rancher, defined the ethical challenge to the church clearly, pointing to two examples in history -- the abolition movement, when churches and people of faith formed an underground railroad to help escaped slaves cross borders and move north to safety, and the failure of the European church to protect Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust.

A few of us began to hide refugees in homes in Tucson. It didn?t take long to run out of room in homes, and the church that I served as pastor began to take in refugees. The Border Patrol soon discovered our smuggling organization and sent a message: ?We know what you?re doing. Stop or we will indict you on felony charges.?

Before we were indicted, we decided to go public by declaring Southside Presbyterian Church a sanctuary for refugees from Central America. Four other churches joined us in 1982, and a movement began.

Protestant churches, Catholic parishes and monasteries, synagogues and Quaker meetings began to declare

sanctuary and protect refugees. What became to be known as the ?New Underground Railroad? moved refugees safely from the border to sanctuaries across the country.

What originated in communities of faith was adopted by governments and universities as well. Seventeen cities became cities of sanctuary. New Mexico was a state of sanctuary, and colleges and universities joined the movement.

In 1984 the U.S. government took action against the Sanctuary Movement. The FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service infiltrated sanctuary churches with undercover agents and paid informants pretending to be volunteers.

In 1985, 16 people -- two Catholic priests, three women religious, the director of the Tucson Ecumenical Council, myself, and Quaker, Unitarian, and other church volunteers -- were indicted and changed with various felonies. Since the federal judge ruled before the trial that we could say nothing in our defense about international and domestic refugee laws, conditions in Central America, or our religious faith, we did not put on a defense and were found guilty.

Determined to take the legal offensive, the movement filed a civil suit against the attorney general for U.S. violations of refugee law. After three years of legal maneuvering, the Justice Department settled the suit by agreeing to stop all deportations to El Salvador and Guatemala, and to give refugees temporary legal status and a review of political asylum claims.

Another civil suit on behalf of the churches resulted in a federal court judgment that the infiltration of the churches by government agents had been a violation of the First Amendment ?free exercise of religion? clause.

What did we learn from the decade of Sanctuary? Let me suggest four enduring lessons.

- First, that the church can be an effective community base for active, nonviolent resistance to government violations of human rights.
- Second, the church has a responsibility, both legally and morally, to protect the victims of human rights violations. We called it civil initiative: the legal right and ethical responsibility to protect the victims of human rights violations when government is the violator. When we declared Southside Church a sanctuary, I believed we were practicing civil disobedience. A call from a human rights attorney turned that misconception around. ?You are not doing civil disobedience. It?s the government that is violating U.S. refugee law, not you.?
- Third, the church is a global institution capable of forming effective relationships to protect the poor and persecuted across national borders.
- Fourth, by entering into protective community with the poor, the church becomes spiritually transformed. The sanctuary church in North America provided a safe place for the refugees to speak truth to power.

The poor of Central America taught us how to read the Bible through their eyes and through the experience of a

persecuted and martyred church. Only God knows how many lives were saved by the sanctuary movement but it is clear that the refugees saved the soul of countless churches in North America.

16-foot-high walls

We needed all of those lessons and experiences from the border and from church history as the current crisis on the Southwest border began in 1994. During the recession of the early 1990s, politicians found anti-immigrant and ?illegal alien? rhetoric to be very popular. In response, the Clinton administration began a new border enforcement strategy designed to look tough on immigration. In various sectors of the border it was called Operation Hold the Line, Operation Rio Grande, Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Safeguard.

The U.S. government built 16-foot-high steel walls across the urban areas of the border and quadrupled the number of Border Patrol agents, vehicles and technology to seal off those urban areas from migration. Then the strategy called for border enforcement to be extended outward from those urban areas. The strategy was designed to force the migration of workers into increasingly isolated and hazardous areas of the border where migrants would face the extreme elements of deserts and mountains.

The strategy forecast that when the word got out about how life-threatening and hazardous the crossing was, that would be a deterrent to others seeking to cross and we would gain control of the border. The plan called for enforcement to be initiated in Texas and California because the INS believed that the Sonora Desert of Arizona would be a geographic barrier to migration.

The strategy failed tragically. First, because it never understood the desperation of poverty in Mexico and Central America. The U.S. government had no concept that the poor would risk everything -- even their lives -- to feed their hungry children.

Second, the strategy was implemented in 1994, the same year that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented. There is a direct correlation between the two.

Despite the utopian predictions of NAFTA advocates, realists knew that free trade would devastate the subsistence farmers and the poor of Mexico. The World Bank reports that more than 3 million small farmers have been driven off the land in Mexico because of NAFTA. These small farmers had nowhere to work to feed their families. It became necessary to risk everything in a border crossing to find work. Since 1994, more than 6,000 poor migrants -- men and increasingly women and children -- have died cruel deaths in the deserts and mountains of the borderlands. For the past 12 years, Arizona has been the epicenter of the deaths and suffering.

In 2000, as migrants began dying in the Sonoran Desert, we pulled together folks from both sides of the border who had been part of the Sanctuary Movement to struggle with the question of faith and ethics in this new crisis. An organization called Humane Borders was formed to put water tanks out in the critical areas of the desert where deaths were mounting. These water stations, marked by a blue flag above the desert vegetation, have saved countless lives.

Two years later, Samaritans was organized to put four-wheel-drive vehicles out on the remote back roads of the desert. Each day, volunteer doctors, nurses, medics and Spanish-speakers from Tucson and Green Valley take food, water and emergency medical gear to the desert. They have found hundreds upon hundreds of migrants suffering from heat stroke, dehydration, broken limbs, twisted joints, heart attacks, strokes and rattlesnake bites. They have rescued the victims of rape and beatings, the lost and abandoned.

Two years later, in 2004, No More Deaths was organized to put a 24-hour presence of volunteers in camps in the desert. Volunteers, come from all over the U.S., leave camp each morning to hike the migrant trails with backpacks filled with food, water and first-aid gear. They place water supplies and food on the trails and a medical treatment facility has been established at the camp.

As our volunteers hike the migrant trails each day, they call out in Spanish, ?We have food. We have water. Do you need medical care? Don?t be afraid. We are from the church.? One morning as a group of volunteers topped a ridge, they saw a group of about 20 migrants in the canyon below. Our volunteers could see the migrants gathering to talk and then start up the trail toward them. When the migrants were closer, a man in front called out, ?We are out of food and only have a little water -- but we?ll share what we have.? That is the most Christian act I have ever seen in my life in the church.

Two years later, No More Deaths organized an aid station at the border crossing in Nogales, Sonora, in partnership with the government of Mexico to provide food, water and medical care for migrants being deported to Mexico. As volunteers talked with deported migrants, stories of abusive treatment while in the custody of Border Patrol began to unfold. A documentation project has resulted in more than 14,000 interviews with migrants demonstrating Border Patrol?s systemic abuses of basic human rights: deprivation of food and water in detention, physical and verbal abuse, and separation of families through deportation to separate regions of the border. Last fall, No More Deaths released a report documenting these abuses titled ?A Culture of Cruelty.?

Two years later, the Tucson diocese, the Hermosillo archdiocese in Mexico, and the Jesuits founded the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. The initiative provides hot meals, clothing and medical care for recently deported migrants in increasingly effective ways. The church replicates this ministry in many border cities from Tijuana to Matamoros.

Since 1994, some conclusions can be reached about this tragically failed border enforcement strategy and immigration policy.

First, the border enforcement policy has failed to secure the border. Migration has remained constant or increased in almost every year since 1994.

Second, the border enforcement strategy is a violation of human rights and international law. A six-judge panel of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled unanimously in 2003 that the United States violates human rights by continuing a border enforcement that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of migrants. The U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have since affirmed this conclusion.

Spiritual transformation

Despite its failure and violations of international law, the strategy continues because of the politics of fear and racism so prevalent in the United States. Migrant workers and their families are termed ?illegals? and ?criminals.? A recent candidate for the U.S. Senate from Arizona said, ?These people don?t come here to work. They come here to rob and deal drugs. ... We need the National Guard to clean out our cities and round them up. ... They have no problem slitting your throat and taking your money or selling drugs to your kids or raping your

daughter and they are evil people.?

The Obama administration has been the most hurtful toward immigrant communities and families. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and the cooperation of local law enforcement have resulted in record numbers of deportations. Mothers and fathers of U.S. citizen children are being disappeared and deported from our communities and churches. Again, this has been determined to be a violation of human rights and international law by the U.N. Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International.

A story: Phoenix police picked up Luis at a traffic stop because the taillight was out on his car. Because he had no documents he was turned over to ICE agents and deported. Luis had been working as a dishwasher in an upscale Phoenix restaurant for 11 years. His body was found in the desert in August. Luis died trying to get back to his wife and three children -- 9 years old, 5 years old and 7 months.

The churches have evolved from charity to advocacy to justice. Humanitarian aid to migrants on both sides of the border is essential to saving lives and relieving suffering. These ministries must continue and expand. Churches and all faith communities have developed a strong, unified social witness policy on comprehensive immigration reform and border protection. Titled ?The Interfaith Statement in Support of Comprehensive Immigration Reform,? more than 150 denominational bodies have signed it. Its positions are supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, the Jewish Federation, the Muslim Federation, the Mormon church, and even the National Association of Evangelicals.

A ?New Sanctuary Movement? has emerged among churches and synagogues across the country to provide a ministry of active, nonviolent resistance to the deportation of undocumented parents of U.S. citizen children. If the election this fall does not result in comprehensive immigration reform legislation, I expect that the New Sanctuary Movement will grow more rapidly than the old one of the 1980s.

The most important change for the church to be faithful must be a spiritual transformation. Such transformation has been a part of our history since the Gospels were written. Jesus teaches that ?I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, and an alien ... As you do to the least of these ... you do to me.?

Jesus calls a new community of faith around him and proclaims, ?Blessed are the poor. Blessed those who mourn. Blessed the hungry. Blessed the peacemakers.? Then the risen Christ appears as an alien/stranger to disciples on the road to Emmaus and opens the Scriptures to them and is recognized in their hospitality and the breaking of bread.

That spiritual transformation was spoken about at the meeting of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, when they proclaimed God?s ?preferential option for the poor.? That same Spirit is migrating north with the poor. It contains the grace to save the soul of the church.

Consider the spiritual transformation of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Romero was a timid and quite conservative bishop when the Vatican selected him to become archbishop. Many priests believed that the Vatican had acquiesced to the rich and powerful oligarchs of El Salvador.

Shortly after his installation, the death squads gunned down one of the best and brightest priests, Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande. When Romero saw Grande?s bullet-ridden body in the church in Aguilares, he believed that the body had been transformed into the body of Christ. From that moment, he knew that Christ was present among the suffering poor of El Salvador and that he must serve the poor in solidarity.

The poor are being crucified in the desert. The church, to be faithful, must be there. Deportations and ICE raids are crucifying the poor and devastating families. The church, to be faithful, must get in the way.

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