

How churches are protecting immigrants from deportation

by [Cathaleen Chen](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) "What would happen if a mother from Guatemala showed up at your church door with a little kid in her arms and said, 'Can you help me?'"

Dozens of U.S. churches are now mulling this question, posed by John Fife, a former pastor at Southside Presbyterian in Tucson, Arizona, in the wake of a recent surge in federal immigration raids. Taking matters into their own hands, an increasing number of nuns, clergy, and their congregations are participating in the sanctuary movement by illegally offering shelter to undocumented immigrants.

The modern sanctuary movement began in the 1980s, when thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing the violence of civil wars were offered refuge by religious congregations. It was a response to the stringent federal immigration policies that made asylum difficult for Central Americans to obtain. It was rekindled in 2007, but dissipated along with hopes of comprehensive immigration reform passing in Congress.

Now, as gang violence escalates in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, there has been an exodus of refugees seeking safety in the U.S. But what tipped off the most recent revival of the movement are the deportation raids under the Obama administration. In a nationwide campaign, the Department of Homeland Security has begun targeting the hundreds of families who crossed the border illegally this year.

Noel Andersen, grassroots coordinator for the Church World Service group for refugees, told the *Los Angeles Times* that there are now at least 50 churches in the country that have vowed to provide shelter from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, up from 35 last year.

"I've gotten at least a dozen requests just in the last three days," Andersen said.

Thirty years ago, those confronting ICE were mostly adults. Now, there are also children who are escaping gang violence. Last month alone, ICE arrested more than 100 people from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras who entered the country illegally.

But even with sanctuary, undocumented immigrants live in a kind of house arrest during the months it can take to appeal for and win legal relief from deportation.

For many religious leaders, it's a personal issue. Fred Morris of North Hills United Methodist Church, for instance, survived detention and torture under Brazil's military dictatorship in the '70s.

"We are willing to fight this tooth and nail," said Morris, who is 82. "If ICE wants to come get them, they're going to have to break down the church door."