

CASE STUDY #3

SANCTUARY AT "THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH" OF HYDE PARK

When did University Church begin the process toward becoming a "Sanctuary" church? Was it during the Vietnam war, when University of Chicago students used its rooms as "free space" to plan protest marches and sit-ins? Was it when University Church parented the Blue Gargoyle Youth Service and opened its space from basement to rafters in weekday activities and services for neighborhood teens?

Some would say these were the beginnings - when the congregation became aware that its space was not intended to be kept nice for Sunday if that meant locking the doors to human needs the rest of the week.

But let's trace activities from the all-church retreat on a November weekend in 1983 when Alvin Pitcher, staff member for social ministries, gathered about ten of the ninety present to meet with him over lunch and plan a class on public policy. They named the class, "The Christian, The Church, and US Foreign Policy." Within a month the class was underway, meeting each Sunday at 9:30 a.m. with Central America and the Nuclear Arms Race the two strong themes.

Shortly thereafter, a steering group evolved, meeting each Tuesday morning from 7:45 a.m. over breakfast in the home of a member, Carl Schneider. This group, growing to a dozen regulars, evaluates and plans units of study and action. It also serves as a support group for the core members.

The steering group, by being attentive to group process, helped keep the Sunday class vital and responsive. When some of the women members complained that male professor-types dominated the class discussions, their complaints were heard. Buzz groups were initiated to allow more people to participate in the discussions. When the class got so caught up in public policy issues that they forgot to keep alive a Biblical faith dimension, there were voices of protest. Bible study and testimonies of how the class has affected personal behavior has become a regular part of the steering group and the Sunday class.

In the spring of 1984, the Public Policy Class, after a careful study of both the Kissinger report and the PACCA report (Changing Course) recommended at a congregational meeting that the church give close attention to the PACCA report and that members resolve to attend to one or more of several suggested activities: pray

daily for specific individuals in Central America, read about Central America for one half hour each day, write people in congress, participate in demonstrations, etc.

In April of 1984 the Steering Committee proposed sponsoring Witness for Peace delegates to Nicaragua. The congregation backed their proposal and raised \$2700 to help send John Fish, his son, Dan Fish, and Liza Hendricks on the WFP National Vigil in late June. The congregation became involved in this project through fund raising, supplies gathering, banner making, the commissioning service, and the pot-luck send-off. And when the three returned they showed slides, preached, and generally gave witness to the deepening of their faith and their renewed commitment to social justice in Central America.

John Fish became involved in the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America and began to organize a Southside Religious Task Force on Central America which met in the University Church library. Under his leadership the South Side Task Force promoted the Pledge of Resistance campaign.

Members of the Church's Public Policy group were ready to go beyond study now and promote some kind of congregational action. Three actions claimed priority status: Public Sanctuary, the Pledge of Resistance, and a Nuclear Free Zone Declaration.

The congregation had some awareness of the Sanctuary movement. Church member Dan Dale was active with the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America and had played a significant role in the beginning of the Sanctuary movement nationally. But the Steering Committee felt that a declaration of public sanctuary would not gain congregational approval at this time. They decided to start leading the congregation to declare its property a Nuclear Free Zone, while also working on individuals to sign the Pledge of Resistance to US hostility toward Nicaragua. They felt that those two actions had the greater chance of success. Then, perhaps, they would take up the issue of Sanctuary.

With many church members ready to respond favorably to the Nuclear Free Zone Declaration, the Steering Committee was planning to call a congregational meeting. History intervened with the mid-January indictments and arrests of sanctuary workers and Central American refugees. The Steering Committee felt that the church should respond immediately with an expression of solidarity with the sanctuary movement and a determination to let the government know that the church would not be intimidated.

In January the congregation was involved in a series

of small group "house churches" (Epiphany clusters) in which they were using Robert McAfee Brown's Unexpected News, a guide to reading the Bible through Third World eyes. The Steering Committee suggested that these small groups become a forum for discussing the possibility of declaring public sanctuary.

John Fish took leadership responsibility during these discussions. Information on sanctuary was distributed. May Lord was on the phone, inviting members to join the Sunday morning discussions and engaging people to share their concerns about sanctuary. The Steering Committee decided to treat questions as "friendly" and not to get defensive but to allow everyone to air their concerns, their fears and their disagreements.

The congregational meeting was properly called for after church on February 10, 1985. It was apparent by the time of the meeting that there was going to be no great fight, no strong lines of dispute. One member wanted assurance that the people we protected would definitely be political refugees. Others were concerned about the level of commitment and the degree of risk that would be involved. The discussion was thorough. Both John Fish and Harvey Lord, the senior minister of the church assured the congregation that they would be willing to face arrest on behalf of the refugees.

When the vote was taken there were 59 YES votes , 0 negative votes, and 4 votes to abstain. Alvin Pitcher called those who abstained to let them know the group respected the right to abstain. The following Sunday refugees participated in the worship service in which the public declaration of sanctuary was announced.

#### Highlights of this story.

1. Study. Serious, in depth study of the issues through the Sunday morning class and guided by the steering committee. Both the class and the committee gave considerable attention to process so that people felt included.
2. First Hand Involvement. For University Church a major turning point was the sojourn of three members to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace. This venture involved the entire congregation and helped stimulate leadership.
3. Biblical Context. The sanctuary decision was basically a religious decision. The "house church" Bible study and the Sunday morning discussions placed this decision in the appropriate Biblical and religious context.
4. Ongoing Guidance. The Tuesday morning steering

committee provided an ongoing group to oversee the process and to pay close attention to those who had serious questions about sanctuary.

5. Ecumenical Support. Through the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America and the Southside Religious Task Force University Church became a part of a larger network of people concerned about Central America.
6. Opportunities for Action. The congregation was involved in a variety of Central America actions: Witness for Peace, the Pledge of Resistance, Sanctuary, letter writing campaign, visits to congressional people. This gave members various ways and levels of participating.

7) Deep involvement

Liza Hendricks

May Lord

John Fish