

SANCTUARY IN CHICAGO; WE'RE NOT AFRAID

by Renny Golden

On February 16, 1985 the University Church of Hyde Park became the seventh public sanctuary in Chicago for Central Americans fleeing persecution, joining nationally 200 churches, synagogues and Quaker meeting houses in a movement locked in a legal and political battle for the high moral ground. Reagan's assistant Secretary of Human Rights, Elliott Abrams, has said, "The battle for Central America is a battle for the high moral ground. And it is much harder for us to win that battle when a lot of church groups are opposing us and saying we don't have it." (Wall Street Journal 12/28/83)

For some members of the University Church, standing toe to toe with the U.S. government, risking arrest and siding with the oppressed is old history. Rev. Harvey Lord, the church's minister and retired University of Chicago professor Al Pitcher are cases in point. Harvey Lord, active in the anti-war movement remembers his own graduate study days at the University of Chicago as times of continual government surveillance of activists. "When 150 of our activist students planned a blockade of Lake Shore Drive following the National Guard's killing of Kent State students, I was their "bagman" (person holding the bailbond money for those arrested). Unfortunately, we were infiltrated and police vans blocked us off and hauled everyone away." Some of the old trouble, some of the old glory is stepping back up to the line. There was a deja vu quality to the religious community's reaction to news in January that 16 sanctuary workers including three nuns, two priests and a minister were indicted on 71 counts of conspiracy, harboring and

transporting refugees from Central America. In addition, 49 Central American refugees were arrested and could be called as material witnesses against the sixteen. What angered the religious community most was the tactic of government infiltration of agents strapped with tape recorders pretending to be part of the broader church congregations. The government's ten month investigation of sanctuary workers, involved 40,000 pages of discovery -- somewhat of an over response when sanctuary workers have consistently made their intentions to aid refugees, public. The government's crackdown was intended to intimidate the churches but in fact, "it was the indictments of the sanctuary workers that triggered our decision to become a public sanctuary," says Harvey Lord. "We had been considering sanctuary for more than a year and this is a church of 200 independent thinkers...you could say they have 200 different positions. Yet when the vote was taken there were 59 for sanctuary, 0 against and 4 abstentions...We feel we had to say where we stood."

As an old civil rights activist Al Pitcher has moved through these steps before. Twenty years ago a brilliant young student of Al's would take up the cause that had fallen apart in Chicago after the assassination of Martin Luther King. The young student taking social ethics class from Dr. Pitcher at the U of C was Jesse Jackson. Maybe it was the Baptist in him, but Al Pitcher never snuggled into the warm cloak of theory the academy provides. He never left off his commitment to the struggle for black political rights in thirty years. Recently, Al worked with Operation PUSH in its preparation for declaration of sanctuary in the summer of 1984. During Jesse's campaign he traveled in his delegation to Central America. His involvement with sanctuary, with black civil and political rights, are all part of a faith commitment. According to Al, "The Gospel only comes alive when you have an interpretation of what's going on in history. That interpretation gives you direction for action. Without interpretation the Gospel is bloodless and headless."

So encouraging the church community, a congregation which is

composed of Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ membership, to risk prison in order to shelter Salvadoran or Guatemalan refugees fearful of immigration and naturalization service (INS) deportation, was theologically and politically consistent for Al Pitcher and Harvey Lord. But it wasn't all easy. The University Church, which probably has one of the highest concentration of scholars and ministers of any church in Chicago, approached this decision as academics would, very thoughtfully and thoroughly.

It would take the help of others, especially the gentle but unremitting persuasion of May Lord, Harvey's spouse and the committed organizing/conscientizing work of Dan Dale. Two members of the community who drew the congregation deeper towards the real suffering of Central America were associate minister Liza Hendricks and another gray-haired member of the community, John Fish. John Fish is in his own words "an acceptable middle-aged Presbyterian who always wore a suit to Sunday worship." In addition to the instrumental church committee studying U.S. foreign policy, the congregation felt it was necessary to send some members to Nicaragua as part of the "Witness for Peace" program. John Fish, his recently graduated son Dan and Liza Hendricks were chosen. Witness for Peace is a program which places a permanent presence of North American observers on the Nicaraguan/Honduran border, as well as, offers supplemental two-week witness periods. Liza Hendricks and the Fishs were commissioned by the University Church to become part of a two-week Witness for Peace team. John didn't bring a suit for Sunday mass in the border village of Jalapa. He, Dan and Liza slept on dirt floors with Nicaraguan families, sharing tortillas, beans and the ever-present danger of attack from "contras." The contras, former followers of dictator Anastasio Somoza had attacked Jalapa in the past beheading villagers as a warning. As for the worship services, the University Church delegation sweated in the mud and branch church construction where the families of poor farmers sang offertory hymns from the "misa campesina" (popular mass) to "Christ the liberator who sweats in

the streets and fields," to the God of history who is resurrected in El Pueblo (the people) in their struggle for life.

The church they encountered was the church of the poor. One of the tenets of liberation theology which John and Liza had studied in their congregational Bible study group was being lived out daily before their eyes. Liberation theology claims that the locus of God's presence in history is discovered amongst the poor and oppressed struggling for liberation. "The experience turned me around," Fish says flatly. "I saw the United States through the eyes of the Nicaraguan poor and became appalled. Later I studied our history in relation to Latin America, from their perspective and, well, you know what happens to people who do that..." John doesn't finish but begins to answer the objection that his views are too one-sided. "People claim we were just shown one side. Normally an American sees the Third World through a tourist's perspective, staying in Intercontinental Hotels, but we slept with the people, walked in the fields with campesinos running farm collectives in Esteli, felt with them the danger, the fear for their children, for the future. We saw Nicaragua from the perspective of 80% of the people. If that's one-sided, then I suppose you could say the perspective of the poor majority is one-sided."

When John and Liza returned they shared the transformative faith experience being in Nicaragua had meant. As trusted ambassadors of the congregation they became the congregation's own eyes and ears and heart. The congregation's declaration of public sanctuary could be so unanimously affirmed because their people has seen with their own eyes, heard with their own ears a good news in the middle of devastation. The Nicaraguan nation had lost 50,000 people in their revolution, and another 7,000 by contra attacks since the revolution. President Reagan continues to threaten overthrow of the Sandinista government. When Congress balks at another 14 million dollar subsidy of the "contra" armies, Reagan rattles his sabre, hinting at invasion. By all human logic the Nicaraguan people should be filled with

government's prosecuting attorney in Phoenix wanted the charges against Sr. Anna dropped. Anna Priester instructed her lawyer to return to the prosecuting attorney and presiding judge with a message. She would not accept the offer to drop the charges explaining that her disease was in remission and after her four-week recovery period she would return to her ministry. If the charges were dropped she warned, she would continue to assist refugees. "If the judge is so compassionate," she said when the state insisted on dropping the charges regardless of her wishes, "let him show compassion toward the refugees."

Eight of those indicted vowed to continue their work. Five days after the indictments volunteers from Tucson brought seven Guatemalans across the border. They traveled on foot for two days and nights across the rugged Sonora Desert until contacts picked them up and drove them to one of the Tucson sanctuary churches. The family had lost seven family members to Guatemalan death squads including their own nine and ten-year-old daughters. "We knew we were under surveillance. We knew that leaving was the only alternative for people who are in danger of being murdered in our country. If we are sent back there is no doubt we would be killed," said the father of the family. The certainty of their deportation was confirmed as new 1984 immigration statistics were released. Last year, the U.S. government only approved .4% of political asylum applications from Guatemalans. For Salvadorans the U.S. refused 97.5% of the applications for political asylum. Behind those statistics are many individual cases where victims actually show the torture marks on their bodies and are still deported. One case was rejected because the victim didn't have pictures showing his torture happened in El Salvador. Laura Dietrich, deputy assistant secretary for human rights and humanitarian affairs of the U.S. State Department said, "I have a scar on my forehead where I fell from my tricycle when I was three. I can claim torture."

Such callousness is why some 70,000 people are co-

despair, ready, as Reagan has suggested, to say "uncle." But they are not. According to Fish and Hendricks they still hope. With shortages of food, of cooking oil, of energy to run even the incubators that keep the premature infants alive, they still maintain revolutionary hope. Hope in Nicaragua is a subversive act. The "contras" can't torture it away, can't bomb it to oblivion, can't kill it at the border even after thousands of deaths. "There's a kind of hope, a spirit among the people that was contagious," says John Fish. "What got to me was that I'm being lied to by my own government. So you come back wanting to tell the truth." That truth challenged the University Church. Faced with the dilemma of other Central Americans fleeing persecution, as well as, our own INS agents, the University Church could state in their declaration statement, "We believe the present U.S. policy (of deportation) is illegal and immoral and we enter into this decision as an act of Christian discipleship."

When John Fish and Al Pitcher stood bathed in the faded February light hazing through the high stained glass windows of University Church that Sunday when sanctuary was declared, they felt a small personal gratitude that their church had responded so quickly to the indictments of the sanctuary workers. Fish and Pitcher are both members of the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, the group which coordinates the underground railroad which takes refugees throughout the nation into public sanctuary. One of the 16 inditees Sister Darlene Nicgorski, is also a member of the Chicago Task Force who was commissioned by the task force to fill-up the railroad with more refugee travellers. Darlene worked on the Arizona border preparing refugees for sanctuary and attending to their medical, physical and spiritual needs. Sr. Darlene is facing a possible twenty years in prison. She is supposed to be intimidated, but she'd do it all again. The indicted haven't backed down. One of the two nuns indicted in Arizona with Sr. Darlene, Sr. Anna Priester, has Hodgkins disease and was hospitalized to have her spleen removed during the time of the indictments. Learning of her illness the

conspirators in a determined plan to protect refugees from INS deportation processes. Over a thousand Chicagoans are related to the sanctuary movement -- many are potential felons because of direct involvement in harboring or "conducting" refugees. Except for Sr. Darlene Nicgorski no Chicago-related person has been arrested on federal charges for sheltering or conducting refugees to sanctuary. One Chicago area sanctuary pastor, Rev. Greg Dell of Wheadon United Methodist Church in Evanston, along with four other people were arrested for a protest action in response to the indictments of sanctuary workers and in direct protest of continued military folly in Central America.

The occasion of Rev. Dell's arrest, a protest of the indictments, signalled both the local and national determination of the sanctuary movement to resist government intimidation. Following the arrests demonstrations and prayer vigils at INS and federal offices were held in which religious workers signed statements declaring themselves co-conspirators in ministering to refugees. In Chicago, after a prayer vigil at INS offices, a larger contingent of people, many also connected with the Pledge of Resistance (a group pledged to resist further U.S. intervention in Central America) processed to the Navy recruitment office determined to dialogue with Navy recruiters about the moral and political objections to militaristic solutions to Central America's problems. When the group was blocked entry to the building, Rev. Dell attempted entrance to the public facility. He was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. But Rev. Dell claims, "that the U.S. government is guilty of disorderly conduct. This was symbolically demonstrated by the fact that we were accused of blocking an entrance when it was the police who were literally blocking an entrance to a federal building. We see that as an illustration of the way in which federal officials are blocking the people from making use of the power of the government to do the work of justice. It is the conduct of the Reagan administration which creates obscene disorder in Central America."

Greg Dell's arrest became an act of solidarity with the other sanctuary workers indicted. Like the indictees he denied breaking the law. Said Dell, "The government is guilty of violating the law. The government's selective and partisan application of law puts in jeopardy the original intent of law but also puts in jeopardy those individuals whose commitment is to uphold justice through law."

Forty-three of the refugees arrested were members of Darlene's Bible study group. The indictment names them as "illegal alien unindicted co-conspirators," most of whom will be used as material witnesses against those indicted with the threat of deportation if they don't testify. Some of the refugees wept, telling Darlene, "they have our picture and fingerprints now, if we don't testify they can send word to the Salvadoran military and my family will be killed." Their choice is impossible, similar to the surreal options of their homeland.

Three days after the indictments came down Darlene came to Chicago and spoke at Wellington Church. She is a shy person. Reluctant before TV cameras, nevertheless, she repeated her convictions about the indictments, "It is a sad day when the government tells the church who it can feed, who it can clothe and who it can welcome. I know I have not done anything illegal. If I have done anything I am guilty of following the Gospel."

When the TV cameras turned off their lights she relaxed smiling to the bevy of School Sisters of St. Francis sitting in the crowd. She turned to the gathering of people from the numerous sanctuary churches and she spoke earnestly. Earnest is the word that fits. Maybe it meant holy years ago. But earnest, not naive, seems correct now. She isn't testy but she doesn't back down.

In a corner of the room after most of the groups had left, the Sisters of St. Francis locked arms and wove a circle around Darlene singing in that soft soprano range that rings Catholic childhood memories, distant, familiar as altar bells. After the

community sang and all embraced Darlene, the sisters fanned out and Darlene emerged from their protective cluster. She was misty eyed, proud of her sisters. "I wish the press could catch this," she said. Standing together with her sisters she is indistinguishable. Her demeanor, however intangibly it can be known, is nun-like. But she doesn't fit really. She doesn't fit in an anglo culture that remains insulated from atrocity, comfortable in its safe and stolid pews.

What sets her apart, like the refugees she attends is what she has seen. Drawn to make, in liberation theology language, a preferential option for the poor struggling for liberation, Darlene opted to become a missionary in a program, her order called "Living Aware." In 1980 she went to work with the campesinos of Guatemala. Not long after her arrival the priest in charge of the preschool project she was working with was assassinated. When she saw the priest's dead body, she understood a depth about the human condition and love's possibility in the world, that is not eradicable. Her past, the long rows of children's desks, church pews, all the lines of order that held her disciplined attention, faded in the midst of the horror she saw around her. She was terrified and she was stronger and clearer than she'd ever been. She began to understand courage less as a personal attribute than as a social gift -- the gift of the invisible ones, those she calls the prophets of the South. "It is no longer time for us to send missionaries to the South." she says. "The faith of the people is alive, growing in the South -- prophets, martyrs, persecutions -- opportunities to live out one's faith. not simply proclaim a creed. They tell of torture, atrocity, poverty, where death is a daily part of their life, yet they speak with life in their eyes, hopeful, faithful to their vision, their struggle."

After the priest's assassination the people insisted that she leave. Darlene began the journey out following the exodus road, the sorrow trails of the people. She went to Chiapas, Mexico, on the Guatemalan border, where hundreds of thousands of

Guatemalan Indians live jeopordously in refugee camps still subject to Guatemalan army raids. From there because of a parent's illness and a hospitalization period of her own, she stayed in Phoenix, Arizona where her mother and father live. There she began ministering to the Central American refugees she'd found hiding in the Arizona desert, the mother nursing malaria-ridden babies, sleeping on the valley floor without protection from the night wind's bone chilling sweeps.

During that period she learned about sanctuary from a Chicago Religious Task Force member Maryknoll sister Mary Mulherek, who came to the Arizona border to accompany a Kanjobal Indian family through the underground railroad to Concordia, Kansas. "I felt sanctuary was a way to enlighten my own people as to the human cost of these wars by giving the refugees an opportunity to evangelize us." "The poor will evangeliz the rich," she says. "We will overcome our fears when we open the door -- the message of the prophets from the South is often hard for us to hear, we who have so much and live in a sense of rightness and allusions of power and control."

Darlene and the Chicago Religious Task Force met and her journey of accompaniment of the refugees took on a new character. She would prepare and orient the refugees for what their decision for sanctaury could mean. She knew her own risks -- betrayal, arrest, being called a criminal, drawing a prison sentence. She didn't expect government agents to invade her apartment, pick through all her files, photo albums, bring the young woman refugee staying at her place to tears. The agents stopped only once in their three and a half hour search, long enough to hug each other and jump exhuberantly over one "incriminating" file discovery. If the tactics of government evidence gathering surprise her, the fact of informants did not. She half suspected her betrayer, a "helper" on the underground railroad named ironically Jesus Cruz (Jesus Cross). Earlier she'd found his questioning about individual refugees, rendezvous points etc. inappropriate and therefore she limited

the involvement with him. But the movement was open and unsubstantiated suspicion could paralyze trust, so she didn't press further, hoping her intuitions were wrong.

She wasn't shocked that a government crackdown took place, she'd felt the hot breath of official anger at the sanctuary movement dogging her steps. She anticipated the crunch when she wrote earlier, "As we begin to walk with the refugees, authentically present, some of the marginalization, oppression and repression will come to us. To hope to maintain our status, our security, our acceptable reputation when identifying (with the poor) is to avoid (commitment)."

What surprised her was the extent of the government's case. The authorities hardly needed an investigation to prove religious people were assisting refugees. They admitted it, wrote about it, sent letters to the attorney general declaring their intentions to help refugees. After the arrest of the first two sanctuary workers in February of 1984, Jack Elder and Stacey Merkt declared their intentions, while out on bond, to continue assisting Central Americans crossing the Rio Grande from their refugee assistance center Casa Romero. The sanctuary workers insist that what they are doing is not simply a fulfillment of their moral duty as Christians and Jews, but it is in fulfillment of the law. The U.S. refugee Act of 1980 states: "No contracting party shall expel or forceably return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers on account of his (her) race, religion, nationality or membership in a particular social group or political opinion."

The State Department insists that Central Americans are "illegal aliens" who are coming to the United States for economic reasons but not political reasons. An admission that the Central Americans were political refugees would imply that the U.S. government, not the sanctuary workers, were violating both the 1967 U.N. Protocol Accords on refugees and the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 which is based on the U.N. Accords.

Darlene welcomed a trial which would expose the government's

violation of the law, as well as, offer the sanctuary movement a public opportunity to affirmatively argue their first amendment right to fulfill their moral duty without government interference. "My only crime," Darlene declares, "is trying to live out the Gospel by sheltering people." The indictees' hopes were soon dimmed when they learned of the government's motion to suppress any mention of the word "refugee," any mention of international law, religious motivation, the conditions in El Salvador and Guatemala, U.S. foreign policy, stories of the refugees fleeing persecution or the Refugee Act of 1980. "What's left?" quipped Darlene.

The government crackdown on sanctuary is a sign of its success. Previously, immigration officials have said the number of refugees that the sanctuary movement sheltered was a "drop in the bucket." The number of refugees has not increased significantly but the amount of resistance to U.S. policies has increased considerably. The sanctuary movement has become one of the widest grassroots resistance groups to both U.S. Central American policy of military intervention and its domestic policy of wholesale deportation. Refugees in sanctuary have told the story of their lives to thousands of church groups, labor unions, civic organizations. Their stories counter the official State Department line that things are improving in El Salvador and Guatemala. In February of 1985, for example, the State Department released its annual global report on human rights which lauded improved conditions in El Salvador and Guatemala and condemned conditions in Nicaragua and Cuba. Undersecretary for Human Rights, Elliott Abrams went so far as to site Guatemala and El Salvador, along with Brazil, Uruguay and Guinea as countries that have advanced furthest toward democracy.

According to Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America member Mary Ann Corley, who has just returned from El Salvador and Nicaragua, the government's objectives in arresting sanctuary workers is to "seal off our borders, to eliminate the living witnesses who can testify to the human costs of air bombardment

wars and rural pacification programs. Refugees who remain clandestine and voiceless in this country pose little threat, but those who go into sanctuary to speak out prophetically must be stopped."

There is hope and commitment growing among people of conscience in the United States that Reagan hasn't been able to infiltrate, jail or intimidate.

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Renny Golden, along with co-author Michael McConnell, has just completed a book on the Sanctuary Movement and the New Underground Railroad which will be published by Orbis Books in the fall.

