News
Analysis



The Rev. Michael Woolf is detained outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Broadview, Ill., Nov. 14, 2025. (Video screen grab)

Malcolm Foster

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 24, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In January 2025, President Trump signed an executive order lifting a 14-year ban on enforcing immigration laws at sensitive locations like churches and schools. It was part of a larger crackdown on mass arrests and deportations that instilled fear in immigrants across the country — and galvanized faith communities and leaders, who drew on a tradition stretching back to the Hebrew Bible to protect and advocate for immigrants.

The crackdown reignited tension between the U.S. government and religious communities over immigration that has flared on and off ever since the birth of the "sanctuary movement " in the early 1980s, when churches and synagogues began offering shelter and support for undocumented immigrants, believing they were obeying a higher moral obligation than U.S. laws. Today the movement continues — and is still led by clergy and religious groups — though the focus has shifted from offering physical shelter to providing aid to immigrants too fearful to leave their homes.

The concept of sanctuary has deep biblical roots: the Bible's "cities of refuge" where the accused could seek fair hearings; more than 30 Bible verses commanding Israelites to welcome strangers; and the Holy Family's own flight into Egypt. "Jesus was a refugee. Migration, exile, diaspora. It's not just here and there in the Bible; it characterizes the Bible," said Lloyd Barba, assistant professor of religion at Amherst College and co-author of "Sanctuary in America." "Some people say the Bible is a book by migrants for migrants."



GTON POST ... SATURDAY, MAY 3, 1986 A3

Nena MacDonald, acquitted Thursday in the Sanctuary Movement trial, attends prayer service with her two children.

Leaders of Movement Here Decry Convictions in Tucson

Herod's Warning About Refugees Recalled

By Victoria Churchville
Washington Post Staff Writer

Leaders of 11 Washington area Christian churches providing sanctuary for Central American refugees lashed out yesterday at the "mockery" of justice made by the conviction of eight Sanctuary Move-

in Washington to provide sanctuary to Central Americans.

"That we happen to be in the holy season of Passover week is a reminder of the need to shelter refugees. [The Immigration and Naturalization Service] and the Justice Department and the Reagan admin-

fendants were not allowed to testify about what motivated them to harbor persons whom they say are seeking political asylum but the government classifies as economic refugees.

"This trial made a mockery of judicial processes in the U.S. court system," said Rev. Philip Wheaton, director of the Ecumenical Program for Inter-American Communication and Action and chairman of the D.C. Metropolitan Sanctuary Committee, which represents the 11 churches. "The judge went so far as to substitute his own words and phrases for murder, rape, torture and disappearance [that the Central Americans

News clipping of sanctuary trials coverage in The Washington Post in 1986. (Screen grab)

In fact, from as early as the fourth century, church buildings have been considered places of refuge for people accused of crimes or who sought mediation in disputes, scholars say. That tradition continued through the Middle Ages and was largely respected by secular authorities. A similar conviction — that moral law outweighs unjust civil authority — animated Quakers and other abolitionists who defied the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act to help enslaved people escape.

The modern sanctuary movement emerged in the early 1980s, when two men — John Fife, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, and James Corbett, a Quaker rancher — began sheltering migrants who fled violence in El Salvador and Guatemala and made the perilous trek across the Sonoran Desert from Mexico.

Because these Central American regimes were anti-communist, the Reagan administration backed them and refused asylum to most of their refugees while admitting refugees from communist countries at much higher rates. Arguing the Central Americans were instead economic migrants, many were sent back to their home countries, often to face persecution or death. Appalled, Fife and Corbett began to speak out. In 1982, Southside Presbyterian was declared a sanctuary church.

Working with mainline Protestants, Catholics and Jews, Fife and Corbett soon created a network of about 500 churches and synagogues that sheltered and transferred undocumented people around the country — an operation they likened to the Underground Railroad. They argued that the federal government was violating the Refugee Act of 1980 and was behaving unlawfully. So rather than saying they were engaged in civil disobedience, they called it "civil initiative," said Carl Lindskoog, an associate professor of history at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey and author of "Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System."

> Woolf says the buzz heard on the streets these days is, "Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe. We don't need cops. We don't need armed military police or ICE. We keep our neighborhoods safe."
>
> Tweet this

The Rev. Minerva Carcaño, a retired United Methodist bishop who was active in the sanctuary movement for decades and served as a pastor in Texas, New Mexico and California, said that as a girl growing up in Texas near the Mexican border in the 1970s and '80s, providing shelter for undocumented people was common. "I remember my grandfather would show up quite often with someone whom he had met in the town square and had no place to go who would become part of the family," said Carcaño, who considers Fife and Corbett mentors. "That was not just our family; it was many families. So, there was this sense of sanctuary in your own

home because of your faith."

The movement essentially had two goals: To protect immigrants from arrest and deportation and "to change the public narrative and by doing so, to change policy," said Alexia Salvatierra, a Fuller Seminary professor, co-founder of the Evangelical Immigrant Table and a leader in the sanctuary movement today.

Soon sanctuary cities and even sanctuary states began to spring up, declaring they, too, would not cooperate with federal immigration enforcement. In 1985, the U.S. government indicted 16 prominent figures in the movement, including Fife, Corbett, Fr. Ramón Dagoberto Quiñones — a Mexican priest in the border town of Nogales — Catholic Fr. Anthony Clark and Sr. Darlene Nicgorski, in the first of what came to be known as the "sanctuary trials." Eight defendants were convicted the following year of smuggling and given mostly probationary sentences. But in the court of public opinion, the trial "backfired because there was so much support for the morality of what they were doing," Lindskoog said.

Also in 1985, a group of organizations filed a class-action lawsuit against the government, American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh. In 1991, they reached a settlement that required the federal government to re-adjudicate asylum claims for about 300,000 Central American refugees, helping establish a new asylum process based on persecution risk rather than U.S. foreign policy.

A new iteration of the sanctuary movement emerged in 2007, mostly in response to two developments. First, a bill that proposed turning undocumented immigrants into felons and criminalizing those who helped them passed the House of Representatives in late 2005, sparking widespread protests and opposition from many faith leaders. The bill never passed the Senate. The following year, Elvira Arellano, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, gained national media attention when she took sanctuary in a Chicago Methodist church to avoid being deported away from her U.S.-born son and publicly advocated for immigrants' rights.

Advertisement

This second iteration of the movement put more emphasis on creating community defense networks and advocacy, such as accompanying immigrants to ICE check-ins. It also shifted to protecting immigrants living in the United States for years or

even decades, not recent arrivals. Movement leaders believe their activism contributed to the 2012 passage of DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which protects eligible undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children from deportation. DACA has faced numerous legal challenges since then. In January 2025, a federal appeals court ruled that parts of the program were unlawful but allowed recipients to keep renewing their status while litigation continues.

With the surge in ICE arrests, new detention centers and deportations in recent months, as well as Trump's executive order allowing for arrests on church grounds, providing sanctuary these days usually means supporting people afraid of leaving their homes, not sheltering them in church basements, says the Rev. Dwayne Royster, executive director at Faith in Action, an organization involved in immigrant justice work and other causes. Churches, synagogues and mosques across the country are hosting "Know Your Rights" sessions, delivering food to people stuck indoors and even accompanying them to the hospital.

In Minneapolis, the Rev. Hierald Osorto, a Lutheran pastor of a largely immigrant congregation and the son of Salvadoran immigrants, says that even though many members of his church are afraid and some are unable to work, they have shown tremendous courage, perseverance and commitment to each other, delivering food, providing rides and gathering together.

Just seeing the members of his congregation show up for church on Sunday has been a powerful sign of bravery, resistance and solidarity. "There is a commitment in this community to be brave and say, ‘We're going to figure out a way to remain united,'" he said, recalling how that spirit was evident when members cooked 315 tamales for a recent gathering.

Houses of worship and neighborhood groups also have formed rapid response networks to counter ICE raids by showing up with whistles and filming videos, said the Rev. Michael Woolf, an American Baptist pastor in Evanston, Illinois, whose church has hosted an immigrant family from El Salvador for several years. Woolf says the buzz heard on the streets these days is, "Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe. We don't need cops. We don't need armed military police or ICE. We keep our neighborhoods safe."

In November, Woolf was among those arrested and roughed up while protesting for the closure of an ICE processing facility in Broadview, Illinois, and the release of all

detainees. The experience gave him "a real appreciation of what state power and violence can do and how it can be used to tamp down dissent," he said. "It clarified for me what this fight is all about."

Mainline Protestant churches and denominations remain the backbone of the movement, but there is active engagement from Catholic and Jewish congregations, Hispanic evangelicals as well as secular activists and organizations, pastors and activists say. "I've been doing immigration advocacy for over a decade, and I've never seen this many people have compassion and empathy and bring their faith tradition to bear and be willing to take risks," Woolf said. "That's the thing about the sanctuary movement — people risk a lot."

Religious groups have filed multiple lawsuits challenging Trump's "sensitive places" executive order. They have also tried to minister to people in detention centers with mixed success. Woolf believes that Trump's immigration policies and the stepped-up ICE raids are confronting people of faith with a moral choice of whether to side with the government or with a higher law. He sees it as similar to the way German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the "Confessing Church" resisted Hitler's control and "nazification" of the German church in the 1930s.

"I don't think what I'm doing is illegal," Woolf says. "What I'm doing is moral, and that's more important than what the state has to say. And sometimes you just have to pick: Is the state right or is God right? So for me, I pick God."

Progressive Christian author Jim Wallis, who worked with Fife and Corbett in the 1980s by promoting their movement, agrees that American Christians are facing a choice in their response to the immigration crackdown. "This is our Confessing Church moment," he says, pointing to Matthew Chapter 25 as Jesus' "final test" of discipleship. "How we treat the stranger is how we treat Jesus. We have to take that judgment seriously."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.