

THE SCANDAL OF SANCTUARY: TRANSNATIONAL THEOLOGIES,
PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY, AND THE CRISIS
IN CENTRAL AMERICA,
1980 – 1990

by

Bradley R. Biggers, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in History
May 2021

Committee Members:

Sarah Coleman, Chair

Mary Brennan

Paul Hart

COPYRIGHT

by

Bradley R. Biggers

2021

FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT

Fair Use

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

Duplication Permission

As the copyright holder of this work I, Bradley R. Biggers, authorize duplication of this work, in whole or in part, for educational or scholarly purposes only.

DEDICATION

For Traci, Caroline, and Avery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for my experience as a graduate student in history at Texas State University. For the past several years, I had the opportunity to learn from professors who have deepened my understanding and love of history. Dr. Sarah Coleman has been a tremendous source of wisdom and inspiration throughout the entire process of my thesis. Although I never was able to learn from her as a professor in a traditional classroom setting, she has served me well throughout the research and writing of this project. Her encyclopedic knowledge of the history of immigration allowed me to finish this work in an efficient and profitable manner. Dr. Coleman's revisions were always helpful and without her support I could not have finished this project. I am fortunate to have someone of her caliber as a historian serving in the role of adviser for my thesis.

In my first class at Texas State, I learned under two professors who changed the direction of my studies in graduate school. I cannot express enough my appreciation for Dr. Mary Brennan and Dr. Angela Murphy. Together, they taught my introductory course, Biography in U.S. History. Their love and enthusiasm for the study of history made my first experience remarkably positive. I learned from their constructive feedback of my writing, and it was through that process that I gained the confidence to write this thesis. Their passion for the history of the United States was integral in changing the focus of my studies from world to American history. Together, they have encouraged me to think critically, write cogently, and teach history better.

Dr. Paul Hart also deserves accolades for his role in this project. His class on Modern Latin American Revolutions was a source of inspiration and came along at the perfect time during my research about the civil war in El Salvador. The assigned readings and our class discussions improved my knowledge and understanding of the Cold War and its impact on Latin America. Dr. Hart's primary and secondary source recommendations aided in the writing of this work. His revisions during the process of writing strengthened the development of my argument and improved the accessibility of the work overall.

Dr. Thomas Alter was kind enough to assist me on multiple occasions over the past few years. He graciously allowed me to audit his U.S. History survey course in my first year of graduate school, and I loved every minute of it. Additionally, he met with me frequently to help me craft my developing thesis and served as an advisor and mentor. Like so many of the professors at Texas State, Dr. Alter has always been kind, professional, courteous, engaging, and helpful in every way.

I am also indebted to the fine people I work with at Wimberley High School. Thank you to Mr. Jason Valentine, my principal and friend. By allowing me to step out of my dual role as teacher/coach, he gave me the ability to concentrate on my graduate studies. He trusts and respects his teachers, which makes me want to work at WHS for as long as they will have me. All of the administrators at Wimberley High School are both friends and mentors to me. Thank you to Ryan Wilkes and Shiela Parker for your friendship and support for many years in our AP program.

Thank you to the many excellent teachers at Wimberley High School for encouraging me and helping me in many ways. Kirk Lake was my department head for many years and remains a good friend and mentor. His love of history inspires me to keep doing this challenging work for our students. Ramez Antoun, Ryan Durkin, Rayanna Hoeft, Ashley Kusmec, and Sarah Myers have made significant contributions too. Their friendship, encouragement, intellectual curiosity, and humor have been a true gift and I always love our hallway conversations about history, current events, and life. Dr. Robert Pierce encouraged me to pursue this degree and helped me to see that it was indeed possible.

Rob Mueller became a wonderful friend during the research phase of my thesis project. Rob's experience in both the Sanctuary Movement and progressive Christianity provided incredible insights. Rob's hospitality as we talked about the history and theology of Sanctuary made the process enjoyable for me, and I look forward to more conversations with him in the future. Rob also put me in touch with others who worked in the cause of Sanctuary, allowing me to do oral history interviews with many amazing people as a result of his connections. John Fife and Jack Elder went above and beyond with their time and stories to help me connect the dots and write the history of the fascinating and complex theology of Sanctuary to the best of my ability. Jaime Arevalo's stories of the war in El Salvador and his journey to the U.S. also served as a major inspiration for this work, and I am grateful that he chose to share his amazing story with me.

I also am blessed with friendships with a group of fellow history teachers from across the country. For years I have participated in the AP reading in either Salt Lake City or Kansas City, and this group of friends makes the work one of the highlights of my year each time. Chris Dunn, Tod Witman, Luke Glassett, Kevin Trobaugh, and Seth Winstead are dear friends and co-laborers in the craft of teaching history. I am grateful for their friendship and encouragement through the years.

Finally, I must thank my family for their love and support. My mom and dad instilled in me an appreciation for education. When I changed my major to history in my freshman year, both were incredibly supportive and remain so. My wife Traci and our daughters Caroline and Avery have been a wonderful support system throughout this process. Taking on graduate studies at the age of 48 while two children were in college seemed like a terrible idea on many levels. Yet they each have been consistently in my corner throughout this process. They gave me endless hours to work and never complained about my absence or caused me to regret this decision. Their inquisitiveness about my research and endless positivity have uplifted me so many times when my own energy and motivation flagged. My wonderful family has been the support system I needed every step of the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. “A QUIET REVOLT”: THE THEOLOGY OF <i>COMUNIDADES DE BASE</i>	23
3. SOLIDARITY WITH SALVADORANS: AMERICAN CHRISTIANS AND THE TRANSNATIONALISM OF <i>COMUNIDADES</i>	50
4. WORK OF FAITH: THE ACTIVISM OF THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT	70
5. BACKLASH: SANCTUARY ON TRIAL	97
6. CONCLUSION.....	117
BIBLIOGRAPHY	124

1. INTRODUCTION

Jaime Arevalo and his friends walked the path to school as they did every day in the Spring of 1981. This morning, though, would change the eighteen-year-old's life forever. As the small group of classmates crested a hill in the agrarian village of San Pedro, El Salvador they were stopped by uniformed soldiers who demanded to see their identification cards. This seemed a strange order, considering the troops were barely older than Arevalo and his friends, and they all knew each other from their time in school together a few years earlier. Most of the students complied with the command and were sent on their way. Alejandro, a friend of Jaime, did not have his identification in his backpack that day. For this offense, the soldiers refused to let him go. Arevalo stayed with his friend in the hope that he could help in some way. As the situation escalated, Alejandro argued with the soldiers about the constant harassment of Salvadorans by the military. Arevalo remained quiet, hoping the soldiers would let his friend's mistake go with a warning.

Beginning in 1980, El Salvador became embroiled in a brutal civil war that pitted the right-wing junta government against a coalition of leftist organizations known collectively as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Salvadoran civilians were caught in the middle of an increasingly violent struggle. Rural communities where Arevalo and his classmates resided experienced some of the worst atrocities. The countryside became the place where insurgents, government troops, and paramilitary organizations engaged in total warfare to win "hearts and minds" and negate the efforts of their rivals.¹ Students of the same age as Arevalo had already been

¹ Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 201.

conscripted into the National Guard, recruited by the FMLN, or pressured by any of the growing number of paramilitary outfits and “death squads.” *Campesinos* desired land reform and an end to political repression, but in the decades preceding the war such demands were met with extreme force and brutality by the Salvadoran government.² Salvadorans felt trapped by hostile forces on all sides with no safe options for themselves or their families as the violence intensified in the 1980s.

Sharp words and intimidating body language left Arevalo with a sense of dread, and he understood with certainty that this confrontation would not end well. Alejandro refused to stand down and the soldiers stiffened their resolve, continuing to point their guns at the boys. One guardsman abruptly ordered the boys to leave the area. As they walked tentatively away, a soldier opened fire and fatally shot Alejandro in the back. In shock, Arevalo ran as fast as he could away from the scene, expecting to meet the same terrible fate as his classmate. He sprinted to his house, looking over his shoulder constantly, but no soldiers pursued him. For the time being Arevalo was safe. He gathered his things as efficiently as he could and said quick goodbyes to his nine siblings and his parents. Years of violence between various political factions and his close brush with death that morning convinced him it was time to leave San Pedro. The pressure, often amplified with death threats to themselves or family members, to join one of the sides in the war was constant for El Salvador’s young people. At his breaking point,

² *Campesinos* were Salvadoran peasants often with limited or no land ownership historically. They typically had mixed ancestry or were indigenous people and resided at the lower levels of the socioeconomic hierarchy in El Salvador. For a thorough explanation of the roots of social stratification in Latin America see Robert H. Jackson’s *Race, Class, and Status: Indians in Colonial Spanish America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

Arevalo departed for a relative's house on the coast to hide for a while and ponder his next move.

After six months, Arevalo saved enough money to leave El Salvador and make the arduous journey to the United States. With \$50 in his pocket and a bus ticket, he traveled to Mexico City. There, a wealthier traveling partner paid a "coyote" to take them to the Rio Grande and get across the border.³ Arevalo held his meager belongings above his head as he crossed the river. Once he was safely on the American side, the situation devolved into chaos. Border Patrol agents chased several of the migrants in his group along the river's edge. Unsure of where to go or what to do, but certain that he would get caught if he stayed there, Arevalo ran for the cover of nearby trees. He remained hidden for hours until he felt it was safe to emerge.

For the next three weeks, Arevalo wandered throughout the Rio Grande Valley. He scavenged whatever he could find for food and drank foul water, sleeping on the ground as he tried to navigate his way to safety in a foreign land. Fatigued and frightened, he eventually stumbled across a farmhouse where a kindhearted, elderly Texan took him in. After some much-needed food and rest, Arevalo received a ride to Houston where his host assured him that he could find a job and a place to live.

Miraculously, Jaime Arevalo survived his trek to *El Norte*. He soon found work in a Houston restaurant and shared a crowded apartment with other immigrants, making Texas his home for the next three decades. Arevalo's story is fascinating, but it is hardly unique. During the 1980s, as a result of the horrific political violence in Central America,

³ "Coyotes" were men (typically Mexican nationals) who accepted money from migrating people to facilitate their border crossing from Mexico into the United States. "Coyotes" developed a reputation for being unscrupulous and sometimes caused the deaths of migrants by leading them through dangerous deserts or transporting them in unsafe vehicles.

hundreds of thousands of people fled their homeland to seek asylum in the United States.⁴ Some crossed the Rio Grande at the Texas border while others braved the Sonoran Desert to enter through Arizona. Many refugees arrived safely to live in the United States; however, the dangerous nature of these migrations led to the deaths of hundreds of people annually.⁵ Jaime Arevalo acknowledges that he was very fortunate to survive. Considering his age at the time of his arrival, his lack of financial resources, and the weeks of meandering through the scrub brush of South Texas, he could easily have been another name on the list of Central American refugees who died attempting to cross the border during the 1980s.⁶

Increasing familiarity with the harrowing stories of Central American migrants led to the rise of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States during the 1980s. As a compassionate response to the humanitarian crisis in Central America now spilling over their border, many American Christians became active participants. The movement's primary objective was to provide a safe location for undocumented people escaping the wars and violence so prominent in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala during the late twentieth century. Sanctuary volunteers helped their charges apply for asylum in the United States, using churches and homes as temporary shelters. Church ministers and laypeople worked to secure food, clothing, and possibly even jobs for those in their care.⁷ When the asylum strategy failed them, Sanctuary workers facilitated the escape of refugees to other cities throughout the U.S. and Canada. The movement diffused across

⁴ Kim Murphy, "Refugees Testify on Horrors Suffered in El Salvador War," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1987, 2.

⁵ Carlyle Murphy, "Four Aliens Survive Tragic Trip to U.S." *Washington Post*, October 8, 1982.

⁶ Jaime Arevalo, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, September 17, 2020.

⁷ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 100.

the country and spawned outgrowths like Casa Oscar Romero in Texas and the national anti-war campaign Witness for Peace. Throughout the 1980s, the cause of Sanctuary attracted thousands of volunteer workers and clergy from a variety of mainline Christian denominations and other religious organizations and became the center of a theological and legal controversy lasting to the present. This work brings to light how the combination of theologies of liberation, *Comunidades de Ecclesiales de Base* (or Christian Base Communities), and outspoken opposition to Reagan's Cold War initiatives in Central America catalyzed the Sanctuary Movement and related missions Casa Romero and Witness for Peace in the United States. Utilizing sources such as oral history interviews, denominational conference reports, ministerial handbooks, and news articles, this work demonstrates how emergent theologies and political dissent coalesced to nurture a movement designed to improve the lives of impoverished and oppressed refugees, as laypeople and clergy sacrificed their lives, financial security, and freedom to bring about their unique vision of the "Kingdom of God."

Sanctuary volunteers took part in such risky and controversial missions for a variety of religious and political reasons, viewing themselves as benevolent workers in the service of a new incarnation of the Underground Railroad. Mostly, Sanctuary workers were compelled by a sense of Christian duty to help their poor and oppressed Central American neighbors.⁸ Other volunteers were drawn to the movement as a form of civil disobedience, demonstrating through their actions a disapproval of the Reagan administration's foreign policy in Central America.⁹ During the 1980s, President Reagan

⁸ Frederick R. Trost, "Sanctuary," *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 79.

⁹ Marjorie Hyer, "U.S. Policy on Central America Opposed by Mainline Christians," *Washington Post*, July 3, 1983.

was determined to prevent the loss of additional Latin American states to communism. Castro's regime in Cuba since 1959 and the recent revolution in Nicaragua placed socialist governments with ties to the Soviet Union in close proximity to the United States. Geography and old anxieties about the inexorable march of communism abroad prompted U.S. hardliners to focus significant attention on Central America.¹⁰ As money and weapons poured into El Salvador and surrounding nations and exacerbated the conflict, many American Christians from progressive denominations became aware of their nation's role in the violence and were determined to have their voices heard. While the story of conservative Christians came to dominate the historiography related to the late Cold War, progressive-minded believers played a decisive role in shaping the direction of mainline churches for the decades following. Their actions and the theological foundations for them are worth significant attention in the developing scholarship.

Immigration and religion have intersected consistently throughout American history, and the connection seen in the Sanctuary Movement has deep roots. At times, religious beliefs contributed to discrimination and even violence against newcomers, seen in the anti-Catholic nativism of the mid-nineteenth century. Political groups like the American Party, sometimes called the "Know Nothing Party," made it difficult for Germans and Irish people to assimilate to the United States. Later, rampant anti-Semitism mingled with fears of anarchism and communism and prompted restrictive immigration quotas by the 1920s.¹¹

¹⁰ Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 175.

¹¹ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860 – 1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 26.

Religion also had a positive impact on the lives of immigrants. During the Progressive Era, reformers such as Jane Addams worked to assimilate newcomers in settlement houses and used the language of Christian service to recruit volunteers as well as raise funds for their work. Occasions when religion worked to the benefit of newcomers remains a topic worthy of scholarly attention, and the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s represents American religion and immigration in unique solidarity.

This work studies a critical moment in Cold War history when it was both intensifying and drawing to a close. At the decade's end, the Berlin Wall was reduced to rubble as the Soviet Union struggled to maintain itself and its sphere of influence globally following the reforms of Gorbachev. Yet, the world was not relieved of Cold War tensions during the 1980s, as citizens in nations like Afghanistan and Nicaragua could attest. Christianity in the United States was in the midst of a monumental paradigm shift, away from traditional Protestantism and notions of an American "civic religion" toward a more politicized, stridently nationalistic conservatism.¹² Mainline denominations had been drained of hundreds of thousands of members and tithes since the tumultuous 1960s, while upstart non-denominational and theologically conservative branches were thriving.¹³ Coming off of the stinging humiliation of Vietnam in 1975 and Nixon's

¹² Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 155.

¹³ Mainline denominations within U.S. Protestantism include Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians, among others. Traditionally the strongest and most popular faith traditions in the United States after the decline of Puritanism by the eighteenth century, mainline denominations became known in the twentieth century for a moderate, intellectual approach to theology. In contrast, the rise of conservatism, sometimes referred to as fundamentalism or evangelicalism, stood firm in their theological framework of biblical inerrancy and the need for personal salvation. By the late twentieth century, mainline denominations began to experience declining membership while evangelicalism surged numerically and in cultural influence within American Christianity.

Watergate scandal, many Americans were receptive to a spiritual renaissance comparable to the development of a “Fourth Great Awakening.”¹⁴

Historians and scholars of religion have covered much of the ground necessary to understand and contextualize the growth of conservatism within American Christianity in the decades leading to the 1980s. Reagan’s election, at least in part, was the result of conservative evangelicals rallying behind the GOP despite the incumbent Carter’s bona fides as a Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher. Conservative evangelicals’ experience of the 1960s and 1970s fostered a resurgence of religious zeal and a renewed commitment to political involvement. Backlash related to the new sexual and gender norms as well as from the recent gains in civil rights for previously marginalized Americans drove Republican support within much of American evangelicalism. Therefore, it is understandable that the scholarship focuses so intensely on this relationship. However, liberalism within American Christianity must not be marginalized completely. In the 1980s, progressive Christians lost considerable ground in terms of membership and cultural clout, but many of the faithful redoubled their efforts to foster a compassionate, humanistic, and often radical interpretation of Christianity.

¹⁴ Scholars argue that there have been at least four “Great Awakenings” in American religious history, though they disagree on the dates and the scope. See Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014) and Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Evangelicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

This project makes use of a number of relevant primary sources, most notably oral history interviews of several key figures in the Sanctuary Movement. Leaders such as Reverend John Fife and lay volunteer Jack Elder figure prominently. These people played significant roles in the formation of the movement and several are still involved in social activism and humanitarian missions along the U.S.-Mexico border. For them, Sanctuary was not a phenomenon located exclusively in the decade of the 1980s. Rather, they view their involvement in the Sanctuary Movement as the fulfillment of their ongoing spiritual duty in this world. Their oral histories, which detail the role of new transnational theologies in their activism, provide an untapped base of archival material for this project.

Newspaper articles have also contributed to the research for this work. Media coverage of the Sanctuary Movement was never lacking, and articles abound in the archives. *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post* gave significant attention to the crisis in El Salvador as well as to the cause of Sanctuary. Additionally, Christian media provided religious context to the drama. *Sojourners* and *Christianity Today* were religiously themed magazines with numerous articles providing consistent coverage to the events unfolding in Central America, on the border, in churches, and eventually in courtrooms. The coverage provided by religious outlets is crucial to a historically grounded understanding of Sanctuary, as they prioritized the religious motivations of participants. Newspapers and other secular media tended to gloss over the theology of the workers, while Christian news organizations provided it in rich detail.

Finally, this project benefits from insights gained from ministerial handbooks, church conference reports, and sermons from the 1960s through the 1980s. The ideology of Christian Base Communities was integral in the Sanctuary Movement, and research confirms that workers were inspired by this outgrowth of liberation theology. The *Comunidades* movement took hold in both Protestant and Catholic churches in the Americas, and Sanctuary participants were clearly impacted by its organizational structure and servant leadership model.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Sanctuary Movement

The historiography of immigration to the United States has been a consistently robust segment of the scholarship since the late nineteenth century. Early histories of American immigration tended to reflect the ethnocentrism of the Euro-American population, with scant attention given to immigrants who did not share Anglo-Saxon lineage. Missing from the historiography were the stories of new arrivals from other European regions as well as Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁵ However, in the middle of the twentieth century two scholars, Oscar Handlin and John Higham, began to address this dearth of scholarship through works that probed the lesser-known histories of immigrants from parts of the world ignored previously.¹⁶

¹⁵ Alan M. Kraut, "A Century of Scholarship in American Immigration and Ethnic History," in *A Century of American Historiography*, ed. James M. Banner, Jr. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2010), 124.

¹⁶ The histories of immigration by Higham and Handlin emphasized the diversity of American immigration during the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Their works emphasized the history of newcomers from Southern and Eastern Europe along with Asian migrations from China, Japan, and the Philippines. Both scholars gave attention to new religious and ethnic minorities and the accompanying nativism so problematic during this era. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted:*

Following the reforms of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, immigration to the U.S. changed dramatically, with millions of newcomers arriving over the following decades from diverse points of origin ranging from Vietnam and India to Haiti and Mexico. Inspired by Handlin and Higham as well as these demographic changes, historians undertook research into the stories of women, religious minorities, and people of color outside the Western European archetype. The works of Mae M. Ngai, Leo Chavez, and Aristide Zolberg provide excellent examples of this new immigration history reflecting the increasing diversity of the nation after 1965.¹⁷

In contrast to the well-documented history of American immigration, the history of the Sanctuary Movement and its religious inspiration is lacking in both quantity and depth. The movement received significant attention during the 1980s, when it was most active, in national newspapers and magazines both secular and religious; however, most of the work was done by journalists, or scholars in fields other than history.

Four works on the Sanctuary Movement by those in other fields are deserving of particular attention. Anthropologist Hilary Cunningham provides a solid accounting of the key figures and events in the Sanctuary Movement with her 1995 work *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. Cunningham's work is considered to be the standard bearer in the scholarship on the subject of the Sanctuary Movement. The author argues that there is a tendency among academics to "perceive

The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People, Second Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973).

¹⁷ The new immigration history post-1965 reflected better the growing diversity of the United States resulting from immigration reforms. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008); Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

religion largely as a conservative social force” which leads to scholarly neglect of other types of religious activism, which she aims to rectify with her work.¹⁸

As an ethnohistory, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande* details the roots of the Sanctuary Movement as a liberal and ecumenical response to the increasing presence of Central Americans who crossed the Sonoran Desert to reach the United States, hoping to receive political asylum.¹⁹ A strength of Cunningham’s work is her objectivity. While she respects her subjects’ religious zeal and idealism, she avoids the pitfall of romanticizing the movement’s leadership and volunteers. Rather, some of the most insightful and informative sections of *God and Caesar* demonstrate the difficulties experienced by Anglo-American Sanctuary workers and Central American asylum seekers as they struggled with the cultural, religious, and political differences between them.²⁰

Another significant work in the history of the Sanctuary Movement is journalist Ann Crittendon’s *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and Law in Collision*.²¹ An engaging work, Crittendon fashioned a very accessible accounting of the movement and the risks taken to help refugees. The core of *Sanctuary* is the legal trouble many volunteers found themselves in and the national attention it garnered for the movement, with little devotion to the religious leanings of participants. Engrossing as it is, Crittenden’s *Sanctuary* fails to address meaningfully the theological underpinnings of the movement. As a result, it continued an unfortunate trend in much of Sanctuary’s recorded history.

¹⁸ Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xvii.

¹⁹ Cunningham, *God and Caesar*, 14.

²⁰ Cunningham, 139-148.

²¹ Ann Crittendon, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988).

Robert Tomsho's *The American Sanctuary Movement* treads the familiar territory of Crittenden and Cunningham but is decidedly broader in scope.²² Tomsho delves into Central American events to provide much needed context to the migration of so many Salvadorans and Guatemalans to Arizona at the start of the 1980s. Like other books about the Sanctuary Movement, Tomsho spends significant time on its well-known leaders like Jim Corbett and Jack Elder. A unique quality of *The American Sanctuary Movement* is the way that Tomsho contextualizes it by placing it squarely within the harsh geopolitical reality of the Cold War. The strongest chapter in the book concentrates on Reagan's foreign policy in Central America and the dissent it fostered within the Sanctuary community.²³ My work follows this thread and explores how criticism of Reagan and American interventionism in general sparked involvement in the cause of Sanctuary for many of its most dedicated workers.

Finally, Miriam Davidson's *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement* is an important piece of the collective historiography.²⁴ Davidson's work was among the most popular and well-received of Sanctuary literature during the 1980s. A journalist known for her reporting on religion in the United States, Davidson does a commendable job in chronicling the movement and its religious undercurrents. At times, however, *Convictions of the Heart* is so focused on one man's role in the movement that it resembles a biography more than the story of the movement of which he was a part. True, Corbett's initiative and dedication propelled the Sanctuary Movement forward, but Davidson's narrow framework frequently misses opportunities to

²² Robert Tomsho, *The American Sanctuary Movement* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987).

²³ Tomsho, *The American Sanctuary Movement*, 93-107.

²⁴ Miriam Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

provide necessary complexity and context to the history of a movement much larger than any one figure. Mostly appreciated by a religious audience supportive of the movement, Davidson's book did little to further its history in any new directions.

Historians of immigration and civil rights mostly left the Sanctuary Movement out of the historical record. Those that did engage the Sanctuary Movement quite often became hagiographies of certain individuals in leadership positions. Heroic measures were indeed taken by Sanctuary leaders, but history is served best when complexity and contradictions are analyzed as much as inspiration. The primary source material is abundant and accessible, but a complete and well-researched history of the transnational theologies so integral to the formation of the Sanctuary Movement is lacking.

The Christian Base Community Model

As noted earlier, the literature on the Sanctuary Movement lacks a depth of understanding concerning the theology of the movement's workers. Frequently the scholarship alludes to the religion of members but rarely delineates their denominational or personal religious stance on Sanctuary. Similarly, it does not pay enough attention to the emergence of a novel approach to ministry with marginalized peoples. This new methodology, the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (also known by several English language variants of CEBs, Base Ecclesial Communities or simply Christian Base Communities), originated in Latin America but was exported to the U.S. via missionaries, humanitarian aid workers, and ministers. Sanctuary Movement histories mention *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* briefly, without recognizing its role in motivating ministers and lay people from the United States to become activists in the unfolding

drama at their own border. Much of the work that explores the Base Communities is found in theology texts and ministerial manuals, both of which are intended for an exclusively Christian audience.

These works serve to explain the growth of *Comunidades* in Latin America, and allow readers to make the connection between the emergent liberation theology from Latin America and the *Comunidades* movement that worked its way north to both Catholic and Protestant churches in the United States by the 1980s. Leonardo Boff's influential work on the topic, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, demonstrates the roots of the ecumenical support system that would later become an integral part of the Sanctuary Movement. Boff, a Franciscan priest, wrote the book to inform the Christian community at large what the "reinvented Church" could be.²⁵ This incarnation of the Church, according to Boff, was profoundly influenced by earlier theologies of liberation in the late 1960s. This "reinvention" provided a vibrant new approach to ministry with the world's poor and oppressed populations. The Church would have to strip itself of its own wealth and prestige in order to better serve its people, and for Boff this included separating the Church from its traditionally cozy relationship with state power and capitalism.²⁶

In the same vein as Boff's *Ecclesiogenesis*, Guillermo Cook's *the Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* informed its audience about the evolving Church.²⁷ Cook's rendering of the *Comunidades*

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 23.

²⁶ Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, 42.

²⁷ Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

movement is grounded historically and allows for a deeper understanding of the religious roots of the Sanctuary Movement. *The Expectation of the Poor* works both as a manual for ministers and a rich history of the new approach by the Church in Latin America and eventually North America as well. Cook expounds upon the changes experienced within both the Catholic and Protestant communities following the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965 and the Second General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops at Medellín, Colombia in 1968.²⁸ Writing from a reverent perspective, Cook demonstrates the sweeping changes to ministry with indigenous and poor communities in Latin America. Typical of the new direction expressed by theologies of liberation and Christian Base Communities, Cook traces the history of the Church as it moved away from supporting elites and state power, to a new preference for the poor.²⁹

As the impact of liberation theology emerging from Latin America became more evident in the Global South, Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* played a key role in the literature.³⁰ Liberation theology, as a theological and socio-political movement, inspired Catholics and Protestants following Vatican II and the Medellín Conference. Without the foundation provided by Gutiérrez, Christian Base Communities would not have grown exponentially and gain adherents in

²⁸ The decade of the 1960s witnessed two substantial changes in the popular religion of Latin America. Meeting from 1962 to 1965, the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) represented a monumental shift for Catholicism. Vatican II emphasized the need for social justice in the world, arguing that it was a vital component of evangelism. As part of its social justice platform, the Church declared that people living in poverty and oppression held a unique position in the Kingdom of God. In 1968, at the Second General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops at Medellín, Colombia, the Church took another step in its renewed outreach to marginalized peoples. Here, the bishops expressed a bold new direction for the Church's relationship with the poor and oppressed peoples in Latin America. The Medellín Conference expressed a desire to move the Church away from its traditional hierarchical structure to foster a "grassroots" or "bottom up" organization strategy, acknowledging that leadership could come from laypersons as well as local priests.

²⁹ Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor*, 131.

³⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

North America. Father Gutiérrez emerged from Peru in the 1960s espousing a radical new model for Christian ministry. Employing the language of Vatican II, Gutiérrez called for a new approach to the Church's theology of poverty and suffering. Rather than simply reassuring the poor that God understood or sympathized with their suffering, the book called for an end to systems of exploitation and "the domination by rich countries."³¹ With an approach that blended a Marxist historical lens with the revolutionary apocalyptic agenda of the early Christian Church, *A Theology of Liberation* offered a scathing critique of imperialism and capitalism along with a hope for a political, economic, and social liberation that was to be "genuine and total."³²

The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities provides evidence of the substantial effect of Gutiérrez's work on the ecumenical *Comunidades* movement.³³ Then coming to life in both Catholic and Protestant religious groups in Latin America, Basic Christian Communities carried out Gutiérrez's vision by providing a new framework of biblical interpretation that sided with the poor. These communities emphasized a biblical approach to poverty and marginalization by providing the laity with leadership training and an egalitarian approach to their religious belief system. Unafraid to politicize the scriptures, Christian leaders galvanized support for a radical new methodology wherein "neutrality" on issues of social justice and oppression would no longer be tolerated from the pulpit.³⁴

³¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 25-26.

³² Gutiérrez, 33.

³³ Carlos Mesters, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

³⁴ Mesters, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People," 209.

By the late 1960s, the impact of theologies of liberation, popularized by Gutiérrez and others, fostered the emergence of *Comunidades* or Basic Christian Communities. By the late 1970s, these new theologies could be found on both sides of the border.

Comunidades became increasingly popular in El Salvador and Guatemala, while also garnering new and fervent supporters in Texas and Arizona. Protestant and Catholic clergy and laity savored the triumphant return of the prophetic voice of Old Testament prophets like Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. Social justice and a passion for reintroducing the ideological framework of the Kingdom of God to churches accustomed to neglecting it became the priority for many Christians, especially those in mainline, progressive denominations.³⁵

The Sanctuary Movement is but one example of religiously inspired social justice campaigns in the modern era. The history of Sanctuary is a vital component in the story of liberal activism within certain denominations of American Christianity. The past forty years have witnessed a boon in the scholarship chronicling the rise of religious conservatives both politically and culturally. It is necessary for historians to show the other side of the developing culture wars so prominent in American culture by the 1980s. A theologically grounded history of the Sanctuary Movement and its outgrowths Casa

³⁵ The Kingdom of God was a significant facet of early Christianity, with Jesus referencing it consistently in the Gospels. Within the historiography, there remains robust and contentious debate over its meaning to Christians in the first century and today, even two millennia later. Some scholars argue that the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven) was intended to speak to the expectation of Jesus's community that God was present with them in their suffering. Although the Roman dominated world was against them, these communities believed God remained with them and would reward them for their strong faith and resilience. Other scholars assert that the Kingdom referenced in Jesus's teachings is meant to point the believer toward the afterlife and God's establishment of a new heaven and a new earth for his people. Within mainline American denominations in the late twentieth century, the Kingdom of God most often meant that Christians should take seriously the teachings of the historical Jesus on discipleship issues such as poverty, oppression, love of neighbor, and living out the virtues of a peacemaker. For more scholarship on this topic, see N.T. Wright's *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne Publishing, 2012).

Romero and Witness for Peace is needed, which is precisely what this work intends to accomplish.

PROJECT OUTLINE

The first chapter focuses on the emergent liberation theologies within Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time in rural villages in El Salvador and Guatemala, Catholicism experienced profound changes in its theology of poverty and suffering. Those shifts ushered in a global movement impacting a diversity of denominations on both sides of the border. Inspired by the progressive reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference, socially conscious Christians in the Americas changed their approach to the vexing modern issues of poverty, oppression, and state violence. Eventually these shifts in Catholic orthopraxy gave rise to the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (Christian Base Communities or CEBs). With *Comunidades*, previously underserved and underutilized populations now received attention and focus from the Church on an entirely new scale. Base Communities provided vital leadership training and organizational experience for the rural poor in El Salvador, while also giving a new vision to Christian missionaries and humanitarian aid workers from the United States. Thus, the *Comunidades* became a powerful and transnational movement during the 1980s. Many workers in the Sanctuary Movement utilized their new understanding of liberation theology and *Comunidades* to anchor their activism.

Chapter Two centers on the major leaders of the Sanctuary Movement and their theological motives. Jim Corbett and Reverend John Fife loom large in the history of the

movement. Their desire to prevent a humanitarian tragedy fostered the cause of Sanctuary and provided it with a firm religious grounding. This section provides a foundational understanding of the theological motivations of several workers in the movement. Individuals such as John Fife, Rob Mueller, and Yvonne Dilling held a strong faith centered on social justice and understood the unique part which Base Communities could play in transforming both Latin and North American Christianity. The link between liberation theologies, involvement in Christian Base Communities, and political and social activism during the 1980s is reflective of the powerful transnational nature of the Central American *Comunidades*.

The emphasis turns next to the activism stemming from the transnational growth of the Base Community Model. Chapter Three includes two case studies which demonstrate the theological impulse visible in U.S. Christians' advocacy on behalf of Central American refugees. Reverend Fife's leadership in the Tucson Ecumenical Council Task Force on Central America and Jack Elder's work with Casa Oscar Romero in Texas provide insights into the religiously inspired activism of the Sanctuary Movement. In addition to their Sanctuary activism, many individuals within the movement were compelled to protest U.S. foreign policy in Central America during the Reagan years. Particularly problematic for these activists was their government's military intervention during the Cold War. As many faithful people within the Sanctuary Movement understood, without the U.S. providing military aid and support to the junta government in El Salvador, people would not be forced to flee and seek asylum in the North. The formation of Witness for Peace and Yvonne Dilling's religious journey

demonstrates the synthesis of theology of Sanctuary with outspoken dissent over U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, the last chapter focuses on the backlash suffered by Sanctuary workers in response to their religiously inspired activism. Informants, threats, arrests, and jail time were a significant part of the story of Sanctuary in the 1980s. The U.S. government infiltrated the movement as a way to intimidate its members, with dramatic court cases serving to politicize and magnify the cause of Sanctuary in the public eye. In addition to the negative attention from the federal government, Sanctuary also drew the ire of fellow Christians. Conservative evangelicals found much to disagree with concerning the beliefs and actions of the Sanctuary Movement. The conflict within American Christianity is understood in its full complexity when the Sanctuary Movement and fights over immigration are considered along with the traditional disputes over reproductive rights, gender norms, and the ongoing clash over LGBTQ equality. Religiously inspired activism on controversial issues like immigration and human rights led the Sanctuary Movement to become a significant front in the expanding culture war within the United States during the 1980s. While it is less recognized in the previous historiography, the cause of Sanctuary is relevant to understanding the clashing religious ideologies surrounding immigration in the present.

Insight into the theological foundation of Sanctuary opens an important window to understanding the current disunity within American Christianity on the issue of immigration. At present, the tension between U.S. denominations over immigration remains taut. An excellent example of this challenge is seen in the ongoing debate over so-called “sanctuary cities.” These locales provide a safe place for undocumented

immigrants, meaning that no local entity such as a county or city must comply with federal immigration policy that could lead to an individual's deportation.³⁶ Conservative evangelicals tend to argue that Sanctuary cities encourage lawlessness, contributing to rising crime rates and taxes in the United States. Many liberal or progressive Christians see Sanctuary as a humanitarian cause worthy of their individual and denominational support. The restrictionist position taken by the Trump administration in 2016 reflected a resurgent hostility toward immigrants among some religious conservatives in the decades following the 1965 Hart Celler Act. Today's "sanctuary cities" are based on the earlier Sanctuary Movement. Therefore, the movement can serve as a connecting thread to better comprehend the present discord regarding the issue of immigration in the United States.

³⁶ Darla Cameron, "How Sanctuary Cities Work, and How Trump's Blocked Executive Order Could Have Affected Them," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2017.

2. “A QUIET REVOLT”: THE THEOLOGY OF *COMUNIDADES ECLESIALES DE BASE*

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”³⁷

Isaiah 61:1

“I fear that if Jesus entered the country crossing the border in Chalatenango, they wouldn’t let him pass. There by Apopa they’d detain him...They’d accuse him of being a revolutionary.”³⁸

Father Rutilio Grande, El Salvador

“I didn’t know a damned thing when we started seeing Salvadorans show up in the barrio where my church was located.”³⁹ Reverend John Fife of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona admitted to a lack of awareness on certain topics in 1981. A seminary graduate with a rather circuitous path to the ministry, Fife did not know much about Cold War geopolitics nor its impact on the people of Latin America. Over the next decade, Fife’s familiarity with the war in El Salvador grew along with the number of people helped as his church housed directly or found shelter for approximately 14,000 refugees during the 1980s.⁴⁰

As Reverend Fife learned about the escalating violence in El Salvador and throughout Central America, he was moved to action. Southside Church and other ministries in the Tucson area would combine their efforts in the genesis of the Sanctuary Movement. These organizations were already a part of the Tucson Ecumenical Council

³⁷ Isaiah 61:1, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1063-1064.

³⁸ Rutilio Grande, Sermon, February 13, 1977. <https://walktheway.wordpress.com/tag/rutilio-grande/>

³⁹ John Fife, Interview by author, Wimberley, Texas, July 8, 2020.

⁴⁰ This figure is debatable due to the secrecy of the movement and the large geographic reach of churches and workers from Seattle to Boston. Even leaders like John Fife cannot say with certainty how many refugees were provided services by various religious communities within the broad framework of Sanctuary in the 1980s. However, he estimates the number to be between 13,000 to 15,000.

(TEC), a cooperative of churches and aid organizations working on behalf of the poor people in their community. As Fife and other leaders witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of Salvadorans in their neighborhoods and read stories in the newspapers about their often-deadly journey through the Sonoran Desert, the Tucson Ecumenical Council made immigration and asylum cases a primary focus of their mission.

In order to understand these figures and the larger movement in depth, it is necessary to grasp the theological basis for their work, which was in formation well before their engagement with Salvadoran immigration during the 1980s. The movement's religious roots can be traced back to the late 1960s as a new, bold approach to ministry emerged from the Latin American Church. Although Protestant, American Christians like Fife and others within the Sanctuary Movement underwent profound transformations from their contact with liberation theology and the resultant model for ministry known as *Comunidades* or Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), both originating within Latin American Catholicism during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s.⁴¹ It is striking that one of the most conservative of the world's universalizing religions would give rise to a progressive, and at times, radical socio-political movement. Yet, that is precisely what the growth of liberation theology provided for Catholicism in the Americas. From there, liberation theology fostered the implementation of Basic Ecclesial Communities in both Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity.

⁴¹ Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) were an outgrowth of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Medellín Conference (1968). As Catholicism worked to establish itself as an ally of the poor, especially in Latin America and the developing nations of Africa and Asia, the Church fostered communities that emphasized spiritual growth alongside leadership training. Most importantly, the CEBs became popular with impoverished and oppressed peoples because this model of ministry taught that God preferred the poor and wanted to alleviate their suffering in the present. As a result, the CEB movement became affiliated with labor organizations, social reform causes, and even outright Marxist revolutionaries.

A Brief History of the Church in Latin America

From the onset of Spanish colonialism in the early sixteenth century, the Catholic Church in Latin America aligned itself with traditional bases of power. Political, economic, and military elites enjoyed the support of the Church, while those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were generally treated with a combination of exploitation and pity. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, the Church prepared itself for arguably the most significant changes in its two-thousand-year history.

After Pope Leo X's Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) divided the globe for the rival Catholic kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish and Portuguese developed their respective empires in Latin America and the Caribbean. Spain controlled the largest share of the Western Hemisphere, colonizing the modern territories of Mexico, the Southwestern United States, Central America, and much of the northern and western regions of South America. Spanish colonialism in Latin America led to the establishment of a hierarchical social structure with people of European descent on top. From this lofty position, *Peninsulares* and *Criollos* were able to dominate the other social classes economically and politically for centuries.⁴² They received the best land for agriculture and mining, and through the *encomienda* system, Spanish elites were given permission to enslave Indians living on their estates with one caveat: to Christianize the indigenes as part of their "civilizing mission" in the New World.⁴³ Thus, the Church was integral to

⁴² Latin American colonial societies placed people born on the Iberian Peninsula at the top of the socio-economic pyramid (*Peninsulares*) while *Criollos* (people born in the Americas to Iberian parents) were considered second tier in status, still above people of mixed ancestry, Indians, and Africans within the *Sociedad de Castas*. For a better understanding of the complexities of the racial categories and related social status, see Robert H. Jackson's *Race, Class, and Status: Indians in Colonial Spanish America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

⁴³ John Lynch. *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 34.

the subjugation of native peoples in the Americas, evidenced by the proliferation of missions constructed to aid in the massive conversion effort.

Over the centuries the Catholic religion became the dominant belief system in Latin America, although it was often blended with Indians' and enslaved Africans' religious beliefs to create a uniquely syncretic faith.⁴⁴ The Church used its powerful position in Spanish society to bless the conquest and exploitation of the Americas. In using religion to justify Spanish imperialism, the Latin American Church produced a mutually beneficial relationship for themselves and other elites that would last for the next several centuries.

When the colonists of Latin America fought for independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the Church supported the traditional power structure still in place following centuries of European colonialism. Members of the upper clergy typically supported the monarchy and remained royalists. Hoping to maintain their high position in Latin society, the Church hierarchy looked to the state to defend themselves from anti-clerical attacks and encroaching liberalization which so frequently accompanied nineteenth century revolutionary movements.⁴⁵ Not all clergymen sided with the powerful during the nineteenth century revolutionary movements. In Mexico, Father Hidalgo and Father Morelos both exemplified Catholic leaders who promoted violent revolution and, on behalf of lower caste Indians and mixed ancestry populations, advocated an end to debt peonage, slavery, and the caste system. Following independence and the rise of nation-states in Latin America, high-ranking clerics worked to place themselves in a powerful position once again. Bishops kept close ties with the oligarchy

⁴⁴ Lynch, *New Worlds*, 31.

⁴⁵ Lynch, 110-114.

and the military, ensuring their own security in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even as local priests increasingly identified with their parishioners who continued to hold relatively low status following independence through the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁶

The Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965

Following centuries of cooperation with imperial and state exploitation, the Church was at a crossroads by the middle of the twentieth century. The decade of the 1960s represents a profound transformational period in the Catholic Church. This monumental shift within the Church began with the Second Vatican Council, although many of its reforms were localized and therefore somewhat limited in scope. From 1962 to 1965, the Second Vatican Council, often referred to as Vatican II, met to discuss a range of pressing issues that confronted the Church in the modern era. One demand made at the conference was the need for changes to the Church's stance on poverty and social justice issues. Vatican II emphasized the need for the Church to be an agent of social change in the world, arguing that it was a vital component of evangelism.⁴⁷ Progressives within the Catholic priesthood called for a renewal of their spirit through a focus on the challenging issues of the day. As part of its social justice platform, the Church declared that people living in poverty and oppression held a unique position in the Kingdom of God.

⁴⁶ Lynch, 131.

⁴⁷ Philip Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," in *The Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, ed. Miguel De La Torre (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 141.

All of you who heavily feel the weight of the cross, you who are poor and abandoned, you who weep, you who are persecuted for justice, you who are ignored, you the unknown victims of suffering, take courage. You are the *preferred* children of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of hope, happiness, and life. You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with Him, if you wish, you are saving the world.⁴⁸

The reforms of Vatican II were designed to make Catholicism more effective in its global mission. The Church would no longer forsake its obligation to “the least of these” in order to stay powerful and protected. With a focus on the Third World, Catholicism aimed to keep the faithful engaged in contrast to the membership exodus experienced by Protestant and Catholic churches across Europe.⁴⁹ Working to eliminate poverty and suffering in the temporal sphere proved a good place to begin.

Pope John XXIII’s call to social action represented a unique moment for the Church. The Second Vatican Council was only the second time such a conference had been called since the Reformation in the sixteenth century.⁵⁰ The Church hierarchy discussed a number of policy goals and reforms over the course of the conference, but the revision of their traditional stance on poverty and oppression was historically significant. With the agenda of Vatican II, the Church showed a genuine interest in implementing progressive reforms throughout the world instead of continuing in its historical position

⁴⁸ Pope Paul VI, “Closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: Address of Pope Paul VI to the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering,” December 8, 1965 https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-poveri.html.

⁴⁹ Berryman, “Latin American Liberation Theology,” 141. Berryman and other scholars point to the decline of both Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity in Western Europe in the postwar years as a major reason for vigorous church planting and mission work in the developing world. New missions were thus started in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, partly due to the continuing secularization of countries like France, Great Britain, and Germany. Christianity was forced to find fertile fields for the faith in poor, underdeveloped regions and thus changed its traditionally conservative approach to political and economic systems.

⁵⁰ Marilyn J. Legge, “The Church in Solidarity: Liberation Ecclesiology,” in *Liberation Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary H. Snyder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 163.

as a bulwark against change. Vatican II encouraged an unprecedented degree of soul-searching for the Church and its people. Compared to the earlier centuries of defending the wealthy and powerful, this new stance proclaimed the time was at hand for engagement in social activism on a global scale.⁵¹

The Second Vatican Council sparked a conflict within Catholicism, as conservatives and progressives fought over the direction of the Church in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the end it was progressives who claimed several noteworthy victories, as the language of the liturgy changed from Latin to the vernacular and the Church espoused God's preference for marginalized peoples throughout the world. These two changes altered the future of Catholicism and would also result in substantial shifts in tone and policy within Protestantism as well.⁵²

The Medellín Conference, 1968

After the Church's pivot on social issues following Vatican II, Latin American bishops called a conference of their own to chart the new course for Catholicism going forward. Meeting at Medellín, Colombia the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) took seriously the new direction set by the Second Vatican Council. Within the global Church, Latin American bishops comprised a significant percentage of its progressive wing.⁵³ At Medellín, the bishops pushed the Church further to the left by advocating for social, economic, and political change. The Medellín Conference

⁵¹ Legge, "The Church in Solidarity," 163.

⁵² Melissa J. Wilde, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 81.

⁵³ Anna Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 49.

acknowledged the validity of Vatican II's call for social justice through peaceful means, but its leaders used language that differed noticeably from the official stance. Where Pope Paul VI declared violent revolution to be clearly outside of the will of God, many progressive bishops within Latin America embraced a model with room for revolution in the worst of circumstances. Violent measures could be used in cases where there was "manifest, long-standing tyranny."⁵⁴

Medellín represented a major shift within Catholicism, and it would lead to profound changes for the people of Latin America and eventually North America as well. CELAM demonstrated the sense of urgency of the times, with upper clergy now reflecting the frustration and desperation of their parishioners throughout the continent. Bishops called for the implementation of major reforms in education, government, and the economy. Causing concern for many of the region's most corrupt and repressive regimes, the Latin Church stated unequivocally that they could not stand idly by and let the "international imperialism of money" continue to keep the overwhelming majority of the continent in dehumanizing poverty.⁵⁵ Revolutionaries inside and outside the Church were no doubt inspired by the choice words of Pope Paul at the conference, when he warned elites that holding on to their power and privilege over the concerns of the poor would provoke "explosive revolutions of despair."⁵⁶

Talk of revolution was by no means the only conversation piece at Medellín; however, revolutionary ideas were consistently top of mind throughout the conference. Peace was discussed as the way of Christ and favored by all participants, but Medellín

⁵⁴ David Abalos, "The Medellín Conference," *CrossCurrents* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 113.

⁵⁵ Abalos, "The Medellín Conference," 125.

⁵⁶ Abalos, 126.

showed an emboldened Church to the world. Bishops were highly critical of political tyranny and proclaimed the Church would no longer be complicit in maintaining order through violence and repression by the state. Further, the Medellín Conference called for a complete transformation of Latin American society through the destruction of the Church's own hierarchical structure. While bishops would remain in traditional roles, the path to social transformation would be forged with a "grassroots" style of leadership with an emphasis on empowering the laity. The Medellín Conference moved the Church away from stratified structures as it attempted to foster a more egalitarian organization strategy, acknowledging that leadership could come from laypersons as well as local priests.⁵⁷

Medellín demonstrated that in the years after Vatican II the Church took seriously its new role as the vanguard of social and economic reform in Latin America. Primarily it reinforced a sense of urgency in working with and for the poor, marginalized peoples of the world, while also providing leadership roles for the communities mostly neglected by the Church over the centuries. This promise would have a significant effect on the social and political movements of the 1970s and 1980s in El Salvador and other nations in Latin America. Sharing leadership duties between the educated, urban priesthood and rural village community members contributed to developing a sense of democratization and equality within the Church, evidenced by the eventual growth and visibility of the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* throughout Latin America. The biblical language of Medellín repeated Vatican II's desire for the creation of "a New Man" even if that meant the symbolic death of the bishops as "princes of Church."⁵⁸ The Church now viewed

⁵⁷ Medellín document on "Joint Pastoral Planning," in vol. 2 of Louis Michael Colonesse, ed., *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1968-1969), 15:10-11.

⁵⁸ Abalos, 115.

itself as an ally of the poor as they labored together for economic, social, and political transformation in keeping with a progressive interpretation of the Kingdom of God.

The Growth of Liberation Theology

The reversal on the issue of social justice experienced by Latin American Catholics following Vatican II and the Medellín Conference escalated during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Moved by the reformist ideology now more common in the Church, priests worked to implement the changes on behalf of their people. This new model for Christian ministry was best exemplified by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who emerged with a radical new model for realizing the Kingdom of God as the primary goal of the Church. Gutiérrez astutely combined a Marxist interpretation of history in Latin America with many of the more demanding teachings of Jesus on poverty, discipleship, and sacrifice.⁵⁹ His vision for the new path forward for Catholicism included denunciations from the pulpit of the neoliberal world order of the late Cold War.⁶⁰

Mere political liberation through warfare or violent rebellions would not accomplish the goals of Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians. Rather, spiritual liberation would be the primary tool by which other forms of liberation could be

⁵⁹ The teachings of Gutiérrez and other theologians who espoused this new approach drew heavily on the synoptic Gospels in the Christian New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The historical Jesus seen in these pages was a demanding and frequently severe leader, eagerly awaiting an apocalypse where YHWH would judge the Roman Empire and its collaborators. To prepare for the coming Kingdom of God, Jesus eschewed the comforts of the world and embraced the life of an ascetic. He wandered throughout Roman-occupied Palestine for a period of years as an itinerant preacher and reformer of Judaism, collecting a group of disciples as he went. They were instructed to live as he did, simply and with a vow of poverty. For an excellent analysis of the historical Jesus and first century Christianity, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 25-26.

achieved. In the context of the Cold War with anxieties about Marxism at a fever pitch in the West, priests like Gutiérrez learned to become precise with their wording. They used passages from the Hebrew Torah and the Christian New Testament to exhort the faithful to understand that God was not content to wait to alleviate their suffering in the afterlife. Gutiérrez explained that God responds in the present to the cries of the enslaved and oppressed in order to rescue them.⁶¹

For the most part, clergy who embraced theologies of liberation advocated a peaceful revolution, based on spiritually based reforms rather than political partisanship which would lead inevitably to violent upheaval.⁶² Still, these religious leaders grew increasingly vocal in their criticism of the neoliberal world order and economic systems which exacerbated inequality. Many of the priests who embraced liberation theology viewed capitalism as “the primary cause of the suffering of the poor,” claiming that as an economic system it treated human beings as slaves “sold at auction.”⁶³ Priests used language explicitly rooted in scripture to prevent the association of their religion with politically motivated violence. Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff asserted that the Church’s progressivism on social justice was well within the bounds of their faith tradition, arguing “this does not mean Marxism, it just means Gospel - the Gospel read in the context of inequitable oppression.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Exodus 3:7, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87.

⁶² Gutiérrez, 112.

⁶³ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Community Models Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 42.

⁶⁴ Boff, *Ecclesiology*, 42.

Comunidades Eclesiales de Base

As liberation theology expanded its influence in Latin America, the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* grew alongside it. From its origins in Brazil in the 1960s, CEB adherents believed that small, close-knit communities formed around their spiritual devotion could lead to a “quiet revolt” against systems of exploitation and traditional church-state alliances.⁶⁵ Taking cues from Vatican II and Medellín, the *Comunidades* espoused a mission “not only *to* the poor...but *from* the poor as well.”⁶⁶ Incorporating elements of liberation theology, CEBs criticized the modern capitalist system and the ways in which the Church supported it. Comparisons to the Inquisition, the Crusades, and slavery were common in the language of reformers in the *Comunidades* movement, who believed the Church deserved judgment and a loss of authority for its “collective sin” of legitimizing repressive regimes, exploitative labor practices, and massacres in the name of Christ.⁶⁷ In this vacuum of spiritual authority and leadership, *Comunidades* demonstrated that the laity could fulfill vital roles within the Church. While the laity could not be authorized to serve the Eucharist or perform baptisms, there were many important services that could be done by parishioners. Such lay leaders could serve in new roles as prayers, blessers, or so-called “*beatos*” (pious ones).⁶⁸

As a political ideology, socialism continued to make inroads into the consciousness of Latin Americans throughout the 1960s and 1970s. *Comunidades* both competed against socialism and at times seemed to co-opt it. Clergy who embraced the

⁶⁵ Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 2.

⁶⁶ Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor*, 8.

⁶⁷ Cook, 33.

⁶⁸ Cook, 63.

CEB model endeavored to make the leadership of the Church “more horizontal” and “less paternalistic” which allowed for the integration and empowerment of people on the margins of Latin society. Parishes with a shortage of priests turned over more and more of the spiritual duties to the laity, hoping to incorporate some of the egalitarian goals of Marxism while keeping the movement religiously motivated and focused.⁶⁹ Providing Latin America’s marginalized peoples with hope and purpose allowed for the *Comunidades* movement to form over 150,000 bases in Latin America by the 1980s. With this impressive growth, the movement gained momentum and gathered more adherents. Some of the enthusiastic new believers included members of the Catholic ecclesial hierarchy. Bishops who were once subordinate to the interests of the military and economic elites of Latin America now saw themselves as the vanguard of revolutionary change. As one priest stated plainly, “The *Comunidades* are the theology of liberation put into practice.”⁷⁰

Comunidades flourished in El Salvador during the 1970s. Basic Christian Communities served as centers of discovery where *campesinos* discussed the Bible in light of their harsh daily reality. Salvadorans experienced significant hardships from colonial times through the modern era with 70% of the population living in severe poverty, earning El Salvador the distinction of being one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.⁷¹ Half of the population lived without access to potable water, and almost one third of the people were illiterate.⁷² A group of powerful and wealthy elites

⁶⁹ “‘The Church of The Poor’: Latin America’s Comunidades de Base Keep Growing.” 1979. *TIME Magazine* 113 (19): 88.

⁷⁰ “The Church of the Poor,” 88.

⁷¹ Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador’s Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 24.

⁷² Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 24.

controlled most of the resources and therefore maintained a grip on the nation's export economy of coffee and raw goods. Known collectively as *Las Catorce Familias* or "The Fourteen Families," these oligarchs controlled over 70% of the small nation's arable land.⁷³ With no property of their own, the majority of *campesinos* were forced to make a living as sharecroppers and wage laborers for multiple bosses.⁷⁴ Hunger, disease, and oppression from their own government were omnipresent realities for the people of El Salvador. Finally, church leadership seemed to understand the gravity of the situation with the rise of the *Comunidades* by the 1970s.

Hearing from empathetic nuns and priests, along with lay leaders who took active roles in the movement, members came to see that "God was on the side of the poor" as they joined labor unions, started cooperative enterprises, and fought for land reform.⁷⁵ At last, the Church did not tell the poor to accept their fate in this world and wait patiently for heavenly relief in the next. Instead, CEBs used the religion of the people to mobilize them to action by providing them with a sense of agency and divine support. Thousands would even be inspired to join revolutionary movements despite the severe risks.⁷⁶

On the surface, CEBs should not have threatened the junta government or the oligarchy in El Salvador. The Base Community Model emphasized a cornerstone of New Testament ecclesiology: the importance of establishing a robust, encouraging community with fellow believers. However, other aspects of *Comunidades* went beyond spiritual

⁷³ Paul Heath Hoeffel, "The Eclipse of the Oligarchs," *New York Times*, September 6, 1981, Section 6, 21.

⁷⁴ Cynthia Arnson, *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies Transnational Institute, 1982), 6-8.

⁷⁵ Edward T. Brett, "The Impact of Religion in Central America: A Bibliographical Essay," *The Americas*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Jan. 1993), 297.

⁷⁶ T. David Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador: A Retrospective Analysis," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999), 184-185.

formation groups and thus began to look suspect to the ruling class. Due to the emphasis on the development of close-knit religious circles, Base Communities fostered an ideology that aligned too closely to Marxism in the eyes of El Salvador's right-wing government. The New Testament concept of *Koinonia* (Latin for "community") encouraged the sharing of all resources and nourished the idea of "harmonizing methods and efforts in concerted action."⁷⁷ Priests and laity began to refer to the early Christian church in the New Testament book of Acts as the original *Comunidad*. Since the first century Christian community faced persecution, while steadfastly resisting the Roman Empire for centuries, this comparison likely did not resonate with Salvadoran oligarchs and military officials.⁷⁸

Father Rutilio Grande: "The Gospel Grows Feet"

By the latter half of the 1970s, *Comunidades* showed significant growth and continued to gain momentum as a social and religious movement in El Salvador. While such progress on the ground gave hope and purpose to thousands of Salvadorans, it also prompted the government and paramilitary groups to crack down on the movement. Priests and laypersons who attempted to organize rural working-class people became the target of harassment campaigns by the military. The story of Father Rutilio Grande represents a prime example of how the *Comunidades* movement brought unwanted scrutiny from powerful elites and eventually state-sponsored terrorism. Trained as a Jesuit, Grande took an assignment to minister to the needs of the rural villagers of El Paisnal, a mountainous region in central El Salvador. Like many Latin American priests

⁷⁷ Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor*, 71.

⁷⁸ Cook, 71.

of his generation, Grande was influenced by the reforms of Vatican II and Medellín. He pushed himself and other seminarians to give their “feet to the Gospel” by leaving the comfort of the cities. His fellow Jesuits followed Grande’s lead and learned to live with *campesinos* in the mountain hamlets to better serve them.⁷⁹

Landowning oligarchs reacted negatively to the work of Grande in their region, mainly because he organized the *campesinos* of El Paisnal to agitate for land reform and better living conditions.⁸⁰ Grande was respected for his tireless efforts to advocate for the peasants in his parish, and as an ardent supporter of the *Comunidades* movement within the Church he encouraged Salvadorans to create “their own agency” to change their reality as a cohesive social class.⁸¹ In the early 1970s, Grande and fellow priests' creation of Base Communities in the villages of Aguilares resulted in significant change for the people of the region. Using stories from Exodus about God hearing the cries of the oppressed and acting on their behalf, the *Comunidades* at Aguilares provided inspiration for the struggling workers at La Cabaña sugar mill. Leaders from the CEBs took charge and began a worker strike at the mill, using nonviolent measures to force management to meet with the laborers. The result was a wage hike and growing confidence for the base leaders that God was for them in this struggle.⁸² While Grande did not organize the strike, CEB leaders were instrumental in its success, showing the importance of leadership training and developing class consciousness within the *Comunidades* movement of the pre-war period.

⁷⁹ Thomas M. Kelley, “A Priest with His People: The Grounded Gospel of Rutilio Grande,” *America*, June 6-13 (2016): 21.

⁸⁰ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 61.

⁸¹ Kelly, “A Priest with His People,” 22.

⁸² Tommie Sue Montgomery, “The Church in the Salvadoran Revolution,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1983): 73.

The success at Aguilares did not go unnoticed by the oligarchs in the region as well as Salvadoran authorities, and there were several instances of murders, bombings, and kidnappings of priests by government and paramilitary squads leading to the even harsher escalation of the late 1970s.⁸³ In response to the growth of *Comunidades*, repression by the National Guard and paramilitary forces became more frequent and violent. At one point, fliers circulated across the nation urging Salvadorans to “Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest!”⁸⁴ At an alarming rate, the government blamed the failing economy and other problems on priests who had become too involved in politics from their perspective. For his efforts at Aguilares and El Paisnal, Father Grande was killed on March 12, 1977. Threatened by Grande’s organizational work with laborers, the oligarchs hired a paramilitary death squad to murder him and two *campesinos* traveling with him at the time.⁸⁵ His parishioners mourned the loss but were inspired to continue their work protesting the human rights abuses and inequality rampant in El Salvador into the 1980s.

While his death was tragic, Rutilio Grande’s martyrdom served the social justice movement well by cultivating more involvement at the local level in the growing insurgency movement. His public execution and knowledge of its perpetrators compelled Salvadoran Catholics to lean ever closer to theologies of liberation and the *Comunidades* model of peasant support and agency. Salvadorans who were part of the El Paisnal CEB were inflamed by Grande’s murder, with some turning to revolutionary activity as a rational and religious response. One newly recruited soldier proclaimed to a reporter in 1977 that he joined the insurgency to avenge Father Grande and others who had been

⁸³ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 31-33.

⁸⁴ Montgomery, “The Church in the Salvadoran Revolution,” 80.

⁸⁵ Kelly, 22.

tortured and executed for their work in the movement to help El Salvador's poor. Héctor, a nom de guerre, proclaimed proudly his reason for joining revolutionary groups, "Priests are the guides of the people...when they started to kill priests, we knew it was time to organize."⁸⁶

Archbishop Romero Becomes an Ally

One of the most substantial effects of Grande's death was the conversion of Archbishop Oscar Romero to the cause of liberation through *Comunidades*. Regarded as a reliable conservative and appointed to keep renegade clerics in line with Vatican traditionalism, Romero became motivated to help the poor of El Salvador as a result of the brutal execution of his friend Rutilio Grande. Witnesses recalled that authorities forced Romero to take Grande's bloody and bullet-riddled corpse from a table in the sanctuary. As Romero carried his friend's body outside for burial, it looked to observers like the disciples carrying the body of Christ away from the cross.⁸⁷ To show the gravity of the government's actions against the Church, Father Romero called for all Catholic schools in El Salvador to close for three days and canceled all religious services nationwide. Additionally, Romero refused to attend government functions until justice was served in the case of Grande. For the next three years, he did not attend a single government event as a form of peaceful protest.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Special to The New York Times. "Why they Fight: Rebels Tell their Stories." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 24, 1985. 1, <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/111138928?accountid=5683>.

⁸⁷ John Fife, Interview with Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 5, 2020.

⁸⁸ Peterson, 61.

After Grande's funeral, Oscar Romero transformed into a passionate leader of the movement to bring about a more democratic, peaceful, and just society in El Salvador. Over the next three years as the Archbishop of San Salvador, his sermons became known for their blunt criticisms of government repression. Yet, Romero worked diligently to keep himself and other clergy from excessive partisanship, urging followers to see the fight as "not between the Church and the government," but instead "between the government and the people."⁸⁹ Semantically Romero may have been safe, but the government and oligarchy viewed his sermons with increasing suspicion and hostility. To the opposition, the priest and his movement were stating unequivocally that the people were for the Church and the Church stood with the people. Battle lines had been drawn, and Romero was increasingly seen as an enemy of the state for his outspoken beliefs.

Romero's teachings about the cycle of poverty and its correlation to the corruption of the state intensified in 1978 and 1979. On the harsh reality faced by his fellow Salvadorans, Romero was uncompromising. He discussed the need for land redistribution and fair wages for *campesinos* while condemning the oligarchs for their selfishness. His homilies became more focused on a "society of solidarity" with the impoverished.

El Salvador's land, like its harvests, is for the flourishing of all Salvadorans, not just for the enrichment of the few, which is a purpose they at best only partially fulfill.⁹⁰

In a fiery sermon dated December 6, 1979, Romero continued to push for aggressive reforms.

⁸⁹ Peterson, 62.

⁹⁰ Matthew Philipp Whelan, *Blood in the Fields: Oscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 72.

Agrarian reform should not be undertaken simply so as to find a way of salvaging the capitalist economic system and allowing it to go on developing in such a way that wealth is accumulated and concentrated in the hands of a few...Nor should it be done so as to silence the *campesinos*, to prevent them from organizing themselves and so increasing their political, economic, and social involvement. Agrarian reform ought not to make the *campesinos* dependent upon the state. It ought to leave them free in their relationship with the state.⁹¹

Hearing Romero's words, rural peasants and poor urbanites became hopeful for a different future while the ruling elites perceived only the threat to their own power and status. El Salvador's political leaders continually tried to silence Romero through persuasion and intimidation. Labeling priests who worked in the CEB movement as "subversives," the National Guard and their allies in various death squads would eventually escalate the war against the priests who dared get involved in politics.⁹²

On Sunday March 23, 1980, Archbishop Romero delivered the homily at the Basílica del Sagrado Corazón in the bustling capital of San Salvador. He performed his priestly duties as he did each Sunday, and then addressed the current political strife engulfing the nation. Romero voiced, in a public yet sacred space, his frustration over the ongoing mistreatment of the people in his religious community, and Salvadorans at large.

I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army, and in particular, to the troops of the National Guard, the police, the garrisons. Brothers, you are part of our very own people. You kill your *campesino* brothers.... No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God...In the name of God, then, and in the name of the suffering people whose cries rise daily more loudly to heaven, I plead with you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: put an end to this repression!⁹³

⁹¹ Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 43.

⁹² Montgomery, "The Church in the Salvadoran Revolution," 76-77.

⁹³ Matt Eisenbrandt, *Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Oscar Romero and the Quest to Bring His Killers to Justice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 56-57.

The response from the Salvadoran government to Romero's impassioned plea was swift, severe, and predictable. Mass arrests, violence to end peaceful demonstrations, torture, bombings, "disappearances" and assassinations became common when rural *campesinos* and urban working-class people organized and demanded change. The junta and the oligarchy turned to violence in response to Romero's peaceful yet vocal critique of the system. His words were heard by his parishioners in crowded sanctuaries and by millions at home via weekly radio broadcasts. The day after his call for a cessation of government oppression, Monsignor Romero was in the Hospital de la Divina Providencia celebrating Mass. The crack of an assassin's bullet pierced the quiet of the church and ended the priest's life as he stood at the altar. Romero's murder devastated the people of El Salvador, yet it was hardly unexpected to anyone with knowledge of the political and religious climate of the country in 1980.⁹⁴

Archbishop Romero was not alone in his religiously inspired activism on behalf of the poor. Other clergy members organized and formed coalitions with the goal of ending the autocratic military government and implementing the land reform necessary to make El Salvador a more egalitarian nation. Numerous priests and nuns contributed to the movement by forming groups like the Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR) and the Revolutionary Coordinator of the Masses, which later became the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR) and merged with the FMLN during the war.⁹⁵ The government refused to let these coalitions gain too much momentum, employing a series of high profile kidnappings, executions, and tortures to send the message that organizing

⁹⁴ Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 63.

⁹⁵ Peterson, *Martyrdom*, 32.

of any kind, even when done by respected priests in a Catholic nation, would not be tolerated.⁹⁶ From the *Comunidades* perspective, the people had a right to peaceably organize. Yet, all forms of organization were viewed the same way by El Salvador's government, with their consistent response being the employment of public violence to thwart insurgency movements.

The government's tactics reached a new level of depravity with the massacre of approximately 1,000 civilians at El Mozote in December of 1980.⁹⁷ Hoping to silence critics of the government and prevent further organizational work on behalf of impoverished Salvadorans, the massacre had the opposite effect as more peasants joined revolutionary groups. Not surprisingly, the way that many *campesinos* discovered the revolutionary options for them was through exposure in political discussion groups in their village *Comunidades*.⁹⁸ For many Salvadoran Catholics, it was the repression of the 1970s that led them to join the insurgency by the 1980s. Their options were severely limited. They could continue to be victimized or join groups dedicated to finally do something about El Salvador's unjust government and society.⁹⁹

Maryknoll "Missioners" and the Transnationalism of Base Communities

Not all Salvadoran revolutionaries were motivated by religious ideology, but it is clear that the *Comunidades* played a major role in the formation of class consciousness and provided the necessary leadership training and vision for many *campesinos* seeking

⁹⁶ Peterson, 32-33.

⁹⁷ Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁹⁸ Peterson, 58.

⁹⁹ Erik Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 210-211.

true and lasting change for their people. The groundwork laid by priests and laypersons in the CEB movement did not remain in El Salvador or Guatemala. Instead, the concept of Basic Christian Communities diffused to other nations in the developing world as well as to the United States of America. When it arrived in the U.S., the idealism inherent in fostering profound social, economic, and political change via religious dedication found a number of enthusiastic proponents.

The transnational nature of Christian Base Communities owes much to the work of missionaries and aid workers who lived and worked among the people in El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s. Missionaries from the United States with a Catholic organization known as the “Maryknollers” engaged in work throughout Latin America, instilled with the virtues of political involvement from a Christian paradigm. After the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism embarked on a mission to alter the course of the Cold War in the developing world. The Maryknoll Order embodied this new call to combine social justice and evangelization efforts. Not comfortable with ceding the Third World to atheistic communism, the Catholic Church sent thousands of dedicated priests and nuns on a global mission. They were to win hearts and minds for Christ while working simultaneously to usher in their version of the Kingdom of God. The Maryknollers would prioritize social justice by the “integration of faith and action.”¹⁰⁰

Their mission in the developing world combined evangelism with pragmatic humanitarianism, allowing Maryknollers to become the foot soldiers of Vatican II and Medellín. They built schools, taught nutrition and childcare courses in rural villages, provided medical care, and encouraged the development of cooperative farming and

¹⁰⁰ Amanda L. Izzo, *Liberal Christianity and Women's Global Activism: The YWCA of the USA and the Maryknoll Sisters* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 162.

cottage industries.¹⁰¹ Their work was the CEB model on full display in Latin America. In the context of the Cold War, their actions were viewed with suspicion by authoritarian, conservative regimes throughout Central America. In neighboring Honduras, the government banned any further expansion of Maryknoller programs or additional workers, citing concerns over the importation of radicalism.¹⁰²

In El Salvador, the Maryknoll Sisters were known for allying religiously with *campesinos*, but they often ventured beyond prayer and spiritual community building as part of their quest for social justice. The sisters' approach to their work with El Salvador's marginalized populations reflected the spirit of *Comunidades* and was therefore distinct on many levels. First, Maryknollers chose to not live in convents away from the people they served. Instead, they lived with them, ate their food, worked in their fields, and shared life with them.¹⁰³ Additionally, democratization was prioritized within the Maryknoll community. To better identify with their parishioners, the sisters called themselves "missioners" instead of "missionaries," hoping to shake some of the historical baggage of Christian efforts in Latin America prior to Vatican II.¹⁰⁴ Maryknollers also distanced themselves from the traditional hierarchical organizational structure. They adopted, from Vatican II, the ideology of "collegiality and democracy" and utilized consensus building in place of the formerly centralized autocracy of Mother Superior.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Richard N. Osling, "Those Beleaguered Maryknollers," *TIME*, July 6, 1981. <https://eds-a-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=d3047b68-25c5-4589-bcac-c0d89d2b0741%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZlLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=54220861&db=f6h>

¹⁰² Osling, "Those Beleaguered Maryknollers."

¹⁰³ Izzo, *Liberal Christianity and Women's Global Activism*, 163.

¹⁰⁴ Izzo, 165-166.

¹⁰⁵ Izzo, 166.

Maryknollers were clearly inspired by the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference. They also read the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez and helped to disseminate liberation theology through their own publishing house in the United States, Orbis Books.¹⁰⁶ By the 1970s, Maryknollers took to heart the doctrine of liberation theology as an attainable goal to be realized in the present, asserting that it was not just a heavenly objective. Like other socially conscious Christians during the Cold War, Maryknollers learned the value of being cautious with their language. They used scriptural references of God's love for the poor and oppressed and hoped to avoid too much criticism from conservatives worried about overt political activities within the Church.

Such concerns about their collective image proved prescient for the Maryknollers in Latin America. The Salvadoran government accused the group's members of being "subversives" with the sole purpose of sowing discord among the lower social classes.¹⁰⁷ In keeping with the developing pattern throughout Latin America, rightist governments and their supportive oligarchies in the region perceived liberation theology and the accompanying *Comunidades* as national security threats. By the 1980s, El Salvador could count on the United States for support in thwarting the efforts of such subversives, even when the troublemakers were American religious workers.

To a certain degree, Maryknollers earned their reputation in Central America. Using the CEB model, Maryknoll workers organized *campesinos* in rural villages and taught them the importance of unity in class struggle. They taught young people

¹⁰⁶ Theresa Keeley, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 38.

¹⁰⁷ Keeley, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns*, 69.

leadership skills and community building along with Bible lessons and the catechism. Young women in the Central American mission field were a particular focus of Maryknoll Sisters; empowerment became a primary objective alongside evangelism. This foundational work led to some remarkable transformations of the Salvadoran people, according to the recollections of some Maryknoll workers.

When I first arrived in Tamanique (*La Libertad*), every time a child died the family would say, “It’s the will of God.” But after the people became involved in the (Basic) Christian communities that attitude began to change...After a while they began to say, “the system caused this.”¹⁰⁸

El Salvador’s government eventually cracked down on the Maryknollers and the entire CEB movement, labelling liberation theology the gravest security threat to the nation. Priests with liberation theology affiliations were harassed and sometimes killed. Meanwhile, CEB participants and Maryknoll leadership were criticized vocally by the Salvadoran press and through the bully pulpit of President Molina.¹⁰⁹ Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clark and Ita Ford, along with Jean Donovan and Dorothy Kazel, two laypersons, soon felt the full force of the resistance to their efforts with *campesinos*. In 1980, just months after the death of Romero, the death squads came for them. After disappearing during a return trip from the airport, local villagers discovered the bodies of the sisters in a shallow roadside grave. There was evidence of rape and torture.¹¹⁰

Following the deaths of the sisters, the parent organization called back the Maryknollers to the United States out of grave concern for their safety. Some returned

¹⁰⁸ Keeley, 74.

¹⁰⁹ Keeley, 77, 90.

¹¹⁰ Jeff Severns Guntzel, “Maryknoll marks 25 years since martyrs’ deaths,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 16, 2005
<https://eds-a-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=0dc1ebfe-fd0e-4804-88f8-bc4b5e7f7372%40sdc-v-sessmgr02>.

home, while others stayed in El Salvador and neighboring countries, determined to live and work among the people they felt called to serve for as long as they could. The martyrdom of Grande, Romero, the Maryknoll Sisters, and countless others contributed to the transnational nature of the CEB movement, and the Maryknollers that left El Salvador returned to the U.S. with a commitment to aid the poor and dispossessed. Their pioneering efforts for the Church in Latin America paid significant dividends over the course of the next decade, as more and more American ministers and laypeople learned of the movement and the sacrifices made on behalf of the *campesinos*.

After exposure to the stories of the Maryknollers and others connected with the CEB movement in El Salvador, Reverend John Fife decided it was time to educate himself on developments in countries where his church was supposed to have a presence. For six weeks in 1982, Fife toured Latin America to learn more about the theology and practice of the *Comunidades* movement. His time in Guatemala and El Salvador both shattered and enlivened him. Upon his return home to Tucson, he proclaimed to his congregation at Southside Presbyterian Church, “I know I’ve been your pastor for the past twelve years, but I think I’ve recently been converted to the Christian faith.”¹¹¹

¹¹¹ John Fife, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 8, 2020.

3. SOLIDARITY WITH SALVADORANS: AMERICAN CHRISTIANS AND THE TRANSNATIONALISM OF *COMUNIDADES*

*"This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place."*¹¹²

Jeremiah 22:3

*"You can't read the Bible unless you read it through the eyes and experience of the poor. What they (Central Americans) taught me was that I had to read the Bible through their experience...you'll never understand it properly unless you do."*¹¹³

Reverend John Fife

Presbyterian minister John Fife and fellow Arizonan Jim Corbett, a Quaker and goat rancher, quickly became the most recognized leaders of the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s. The two men became friends and coworkers in the cause of Sanctuary after meeting during a protest march and prayer vigil outside of the Federal Building in Tucson, Arizona. The vigils were ecumenical in nature with participation by Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, Jewish rabbis, and laypeople from a variety of denominations. Following the death in 1980 of Father Romero in San Salvador, Christians with knowledge of events in Central America felt they could not stand passively by any longer. Regularly scheduled prayer vigils were held in public spaces, designed to call attention to the persecution of the Church in El Salvador at the hands of the military dictatorship and to memorialize the martyrs.¹¹⁴

Corbett was known to challenge Fife, the minister at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson since 1968, in the early days of their friendship. Using a combination

¹¹² Jeremiah 22:3, *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1112.

¹¹³ John Fife, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 8, 2020.

¹¹⁴ John Fife, Interview.

of historical and biblical references, Corbett consistently nudged those in his inner circle toward decisive action. One day during a vigil, Corbett took Fife aside and appealed to his sense of Christian duty.

Corbett said to me, ‘John, I don’t think we have any choice under the circumstances except to start smuggling people safely across the border.’ Of course, I asked him how the hell do you figure we do that? He pointed to two times in history when the Church was forced to action. One time they did the right thing, that was the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad when the Church smuggled runaway slaves to safety. Then he pointed to a complete failure of the Church in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe as people fleeing the Holocaust were abandoned. That was one the most tragic chapters in the history of the Church, a complete failure of faith. Then he looked me straight in the eye and he said, ‘I don’t think we can allow that to happen on our border in our lifetime.’¹¹⁵

While protesting and praying were a start, Reverend Fife knew that more could be done. He needed to know more about the reality on the ground for the people whom he was trying to help. So, Fife decided it was time to investigate for himself what was happening in Central America both spiritually and politically. In 1982, he traveled to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua over the course of six weeks. There, Fife received a crash course in liberation theology and witnessed for himself the power of the *Comunidades* movement.

Reverend John Fife

In El Salvador, Fife crossed paths with the Maryknollers and came away from those encounters impressed with the level of dedication to the cause of social justice shown by the Catholic workers. From visiting political prisoners to developing new *Comunidades* in villages throughout the countryside, Maryknollers were on the frontlines

¹¹⁵ John Fife, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 8, 2020.

of Christian efforts to reform many of the most persistent problems facing the people of Central America. Primarily, they focused their attention on the *campesinos* who had been neglected for so long by both Catholic and Protestant churches. Maryknollers worked diligently to change the lives of those they worked alongside by providing rural Salvadorans with basic job skills training, leadership opportunities, and weekly Bible study meetings with an emphasis on liberation theology.¹¹⁶

Fife's encounters with the Maryknoll "missioners" forced a deep theological reconstruction for the Presbyterian minister. Raised in relative comfort and affluence in Pennsylvania, Reverend Fife attended a prestigious seminary after college to pursue a career in ministry. There, he was inculcated with the systematic theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Intellectually grounded, systematic theology provided the young pastor with a pragmatic approach to ministry in the United States. The popularity of systematic theology in Western Europe and North America relied on its fusion of philosophy and theology. Theologians embraced the secular along with the divine in gathering knowledge of God and Creation.¹¹⁷ Similar to the writing of "consensus" American history in the decades after the Second World War, systematic theology united Christians around a theological consensus about the nature of God and the meaning of a life of faith. Systematic theology existed comfortably within the context of postwar neoliberalism, supporting the status quo economically, politically, and socially. It was understandably embraced by a majority of Protestant Americans.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Fife, Interview.

¹¹⁷ C. Edward Hopkin, "Basic Principles of Systematic Theology," *Anglican Theological Review*, 43 No. 1 (January 1961), 19.

¹¹⁸ Mark Noll, "Theology," in *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, eds. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 117-118.

Outside the context of his homeland and its modern comforts, however, Fife found his theology severely lacking. His odyssey to Central America forced him to confront his own predilection for an uncomplicated and comfortable religion. Seeing other ministers, priests, and laypeople actually “laying their own lives” on the line to serve poor and oppressed Salvadorans would have a lasting impact on his own theology and therefore his ministry back in Arizona.¹¹⁹

In El Salvador, Fife met with a variety of people beyond the Maryknollers who were involved in the *Comunidades* movement. Some were committed pacifists, based on their religious values, who refused to take up arms in the war engulfing their nation. Others, Fife notes, were dedicated foot soldiers in the guerilla movement of the FMLN.¹²⁰ Making the most of both the *Populorum Progressio* by Pope Paul VI and Romero’s words that “granted legitimacy to insurrectional violence and to violence in self-defense,” many Salvadorans joined the violent conflict to overthrow the military junta and its oligarchical supporters.¹²¹ The theme of the *Populorum Progressio* (1967) was similar to Vatican II, as it proclaimed the Church would continue taking more deliberate action to alleviate the suffering of peoples throughout the developing world.¹²² Whether his fellow believers were serving behind the lines as spiritual leaders within *Comunidades* or taking up arms in the revolution, the reality struck Fife that Christians had a role to play in the struggle and he could not remain a neutral observer any longer.

¹¹⁹ Fife, Interview.

¹²⁰ Fife, Interview.

¹²¹ Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion*, 110.

¹²² Kevin Ahern, “The Justice Legacy of *Populorum Progressio*: A Jesuit Case Study,” *Journal of Moral Theology*, 6 No. 1 (January 2017), 39-56.

Rob Mueller

Fife was just one of many American Christians involved in the Sanctuary Movement whose encounters with the people and ministries of Central America provided a transformational experience and led to an ideological shift in their lives. Another was Rob Mueller, an idealistic young Christian from Arizona who was introduced to the *Comunidades* movement through his years in college and seminary. Like Fife, Mueller was raised in an idyllic setting where a highly intellectualized theology made perfect sense. As a college student in the 1970s at San Antonio's Trinity University, his exposure to professors and prayer groups took him in a starkly different political and religious direction.

At Trinity, Mueller joined a student prayer group on campus. His time with this small and dedicated group of Christians exposed him to *Sojourners*, a magazine which propagated a progressive theology and encouraged its readers to become engaged in their own culture to make a difference in the lives of the poor and marginalized. Mueller's reading of *Sojourners* prompted a significant amount of soul searching, since the stories featured in the magazine often centered on the Christian response to suffering and oppression in the Third World. Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners*, believed that Christians had a moral and spiritual duty to work toward social justice in the present. The integration of social justice and faith was espoused frequently in the 1970s and subsequent decades by Wallis in the editorial section of *Sojourners*.

Christian conscience is especially sensitive to those who are the victims of the prevailing social order. The poor, the marginalized, the political prisoners, the oppressed race or class, women, the ethnic minority - these are the ones Christians should be particularly attentive to in any society. Christians must see the view from the outside, learn the perspective from the bottom, hear the voices of the forgotten ones.¹²³

Sojourners was not solely focused on themes of social justice, however, and Christians like Mueller were drawn to its pages because it also was decidedly evangelical.¹²⁴ The audience for *Sojourners* appreciated it for the magazine's own unique blend of "evangelicalism and justice," something that Mueller and like-minded believers found in short supply in both liberal and conservative denominations in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹²⁵

On campus, Mueller's relationship with a charismatic professor, anthropologist John Donahue, served to embolden his reinvigorated faith and combined it with an impulse for activism. Professor Donahue served as a Catholic priest in Latin America prior to his move to academia, and he knew from personal experience about the plight of the poor populations of the region during the late stages of the Cold War. Donahue lectured on the U.S. intervention in Central America often exposing students like Mueller

¹²³ Jim Wallis, "The Rise of Christian Conscience: A New Movement Is Emerging in the Churches," *Sojourners*, 14 no. 1, January 1985, 15.

¹²⁴ Here it may help to define the term "evangelical." The term is used consistently by religious scholars and historians of religion, although they sometimes disagree over its meaning. I have found the best definition to be the one provided by the Federal Council of Churches in 1946. An evangelical is a Christian who believes that individuals must make a personal commitment to Christ for their salvation. To that end, evangelicals also tend to focus energy on bringing others in the world to a "saving knowledge" of Christ through missionary endeavors and humanitarian aid. Many evangelicals also emphasize a high degree of respect for both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, with many believing it to be the inerrant, infallible Word of God. For more on the subject of evangelicalism in the modern era, see Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), or Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹²⁵ Rob Mueller, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 10, 2020.

to the darker side of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere, such as the CIA's role in overthrowing the democratically elected governments of Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in Guatemala in 1954 and Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.¹²⁶ This newfound knowledge about U.S. interventionism led to Mueller's involvement in student-initiated protests outside Fort Sam Houston, a military installation in San Antonio, and on the campus of Trinity University.¹²⁷ The protests were designed to inform the public of the detrimental effects of U.S. military intervention in Latin America. Posters, chants, and "die-ins" were components of Trinity's anti-war movement, designed by progressive Christians to educate the people of San Antonio of the destructive policies of the U.S. government. In the eyes of Mueller and his fellow believers, U.S. actions in Central America were nothing less than war crimes.¹²⁸

In 1976, Mueller was inspired by his engagement with the campus prayer group, *Sojourners* magazine, and Professor Donohue to travel to Nicaragua and serve there as a medical volunteer. Staying mostly in rural villages, he helped with vaccination efforts and for the first time was able to comprehend the level of poverty and desperation of the people in the region. Nicaraguan Christians were already deeply ensconced in the *Comunidades* movement, and Mueller came away from his experience with this model of ministry completely transfixed. The timing of Mueller's visit to Nicaragua was crucial for his developing awareness of Third World poverty and Cold War geopolitics since he traveled there during a period of intense turmoil and revolutionary fervor.¹²⁹ He

¹²⁶ Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 43.

¹²⁷ Mueller, Interview.

¹²⁸ Mueller, Interview.

¹²⁹ For an in-depth analysis of the Nicaraguan Revolution which overthrew the Somoza government in 1979, see Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

recognized the role that Nicaraguan Christians' collective embrace of liberation theology played in developing a sense of class consciousness among the people. When the marginalized people of the nation united, Nicaraguans finally toppled the oppressive Somoza government by 1979.¹³⁰

Upon his return to the United States, Mueller's desire to use his religious beliefs to change the lives of Central Americans intensified as he looked for possible outlets. A friend and dedicated adherent to the philosophy of *Sojourners* recommended a book, titled *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, to Mueller. The book was written by Ron Sider, an evangelical with a progressive political and economic worldview. In a style similar to *Sojourners* magazine, *Rich Christians* was unequivocal in its challenge to American Christians. The thesis of the *Rich Christians* argued that American Christians had a duty to alleviate poverty and suffering wherever it existed in the world. Believers who avoided the hard work of overturning the current world order were guilty of the sin of omission. Sider's book continued the process of pushing Mueller to break from his privileged upbringing and the "comfortable Christianity" of his youth.¹³¹

After graduating from Trinity, Mueller enrolled in Union Seminary in Virginia where he built a strong bond with fellow theology students from Latin America who were quite familiar with *Comunidades*. As a result of this relationship Mueller came to understand that the movement could be both transnational and ecumenical. In the right

¹³⁰ Greg Grandin, "Living in Revolutionary Time: Coming to Terms with the Violence of Latin America's Long Cold War," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War*, eds. Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

¹³¹ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (New York: Paulist Press/Intervarsity Press, 1977).

hands, it had the potential to cut across denominational lines as easily as national borders.¹³² The friends talked often about the difficult living conditions for people in Central America and the optimism they shared regarding the growth of liberation theology and *Comunidades*. Challenged to put his faith into action during a summer break in 1983, Mueller traveled home to Arizona and contacted Reverend Fife. He asked specifically about the possibility of joining the work of a cooperative Presbyterian project called the House of Neighborly Service, a mission designed to serve the needy of the Tucson area.

Mueller and Fife worked together for months of church related work and the veteran minister and the seminarian bonded over politics and religion. Mueller was eager to share in the work of the relatively new Sanctuary Movement of which Fife was now a respected leader. Then 24 years old, Mueller quickly received a plum assignment for the cause of Sanctuary. He was given the high-risk job to transport a Salvadoran doctor and his family through Northern Mexico to safety in Arizona. Over the previous few years, the doctor and his family experienced trauma in El Salvador, as he was often forced at gunpoint to help both sides in the bloody conflict. Mueller learned from his passengers about what they had endured so far during the war, and this knowledge enabled him to justify his own actions in the 1980s.

In El Salvador, the rank-and-file people were the ones getting murdered. The military and the rebels were pressuring people from all sides. That's why I had to drive that doc's family; he was tortured because he helped people who had been hurt in the fighting. He was viewed by the junta as a collaborator...he had to get out. That's what I saw Sanctuary doing for people.¹³³

¹³² Mueller, Interview.

¹³³ Mueller, Interview.

The transport assignment was no small task. First, Mueller had to get into Mexico and wait patiently for the rendezvous with the doctor and his family. Then, knowing the reputation of the *judiciales* in Mexico, Mueller had to find alternate and thereby longer routes through the desert to avoid capture and possible detainment at best, or torture and death at the worst.¹³⁴ Running low on water and food, the young Sanctuary volunteer was able to get his precious cargo across the border and to safety in the United States. Along for the ride was an investigative journalist for the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper, looking for an exciting story about the radical activism of the Sanctuary Movement.

While Mueller avoided capture in transporting the Salvadoran doctor's family across an international border without proper documentation, his involvement came with a high personal cost in another way. One reader of the newspaper story about Mueller's adventure in the borderlands was his father, who at that time served as a federal prosecutor with the U.S. Attorney's Office in the District of Arizona. In a tense exchange between father and son, the elder Mueller shared copies of federal statutes with prison terms for Americans convicted of human smuggling. Respectful of his son's faith journey and conscience, Mueller's father told him that he could never know anything about his son's work with the Sanctuary Movement. They could never speak of it again. Rattled but still passionate about helping those in need, Mueller's first transport job for Sanctuary was his last, although his work with the movement continued in different ways.

Following his seminary education and now an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, Reverend Mueller returned to Central America in 1986. This time, his explicit purpose was to learn more about the *Comunidades* movement and to then

¹³⁴ Mueller, Interview.

work to transplant it back home in the churches of the United States. He researched how another North American denomination, the Episcopal Church, was serving the spiritual and physical needs of Salvadoran refugees through *Comunidades* in Costa Rica. In the refugee camps and in the shantytowns of urban centers, Mueller witnessed indigenous Salvadorans and Guatemalans who served their own people by taking on lay leadership roles. Gathered together in their communities, refugees reflected on the Bible while they also organized themselves to provide clean water, sewage, electricity, and other vital services.¹³⁵

Traveling next to Nicaragua, Mueller lived among refugees and experienced firsthand their unique ministry known as the “Christian Family Movement.”¹³⁶ This was a Catholic program, using the context of liberation and *Comunidades* to foster self-reliance and provide the necessary sense of agency and collective purpose among the people. Mueller saw the model of Basic Christian Communities in action everywhere he went. From Bible studies in rural hamlets led by trained indigenous laypersons, to thriving cooperative cottage industries where women manufactured and sold their own soap to help provide for themselves and their families, Mueller was convinced God was at work. As Nicaraguans embraced the concept of God’s preference for the poor, the actions of the people involved intimately in the *Comunidades* supported such a bold assertion.

Mueller’s reading of *Sojourners* prepared him well for his mission. The magazine had been covering the work of Christians from the United States in Central America, highlighting the Basic Christian Communities as the vanguard of change in the region. Mueller concurred with many of his fellow ministers who saw the indigenous leadership

¹³⁵ Mueller, Interview.

¹³⁶ Mueller, Interview.

as “leaven.” These leaders were tasked with the spiritual work of helping their communities rise to meet the challenges of their world, from poverty to state-sponsored violence.¹³⁷ In the CEBs the people overcame the challenge of priest shortages and learned to lead themselves spiritually. From El Salvador to Guatemala and Nicaragua, members of *Comunidades* viewed themselves as a “union of Christians” who shared everything equally, from the sacraments of the Eucharist to resources like land, housing, and food.¹³⁸ In this way, the Base Communities served as “ferment” in their nations and fostered a level of organization and even radicalism in some places.¹³⁹

Jeff Higgins

Other American Christians experienced personal transformations because of their travels to Central America and exposure to the struggles of its people. Like Mueller, Jeff Higgins was a young and idealistic Christian when he heard about the life and death struggles faced by Salvadoran refugees in the early 1980s. After completing his university studies with a degree in History supplemented with classes in modern Latin America, Higgins almost attended graduate school to pursue a terminal degree in the field. However, after learning about theologies of liberation and the Sanctuary Movement, Higgins instead embraced a Marxist interpretation of the situation in Central America. Challenged by a college professor to be more than just a “coffee shop

¹³⁷ The biblical reference to leaven or yeast comes from the parable of Jesus found in the Gospel of Luke (Chapter 13, verses 20-21) where he said that the Kingdom of God is similar to leaven in the lives of his followers. It starts out very small but like leaven placed in dough can cause a significant change in the quantity and quality of the bread.

¹³⁸ Joyce Hollyday, “Leaven of the People: The Witness of Base Communities,” *Sojourners*, December 9, 1980, 23.

¹³⁹ Rob Mueller, Interview.

communist,” Higgins traveled to Latin America during the 1980s to learn from the people about their struggle against oppression and poverty.¹⁴⁰ In El Salvador, he involved himself in *Comunidades* while also serving on the front lines with the FMLN against the junta. He trained as an auto mechanic so that, upon his return to the United States, he could assist the Sanctuary Movement by helping maintain the vehicles used to transport refugees across the border. Higgins represents the more radical aspect of Sanctuary, as most other volunteers were not quite as committed to revolutionary Marxist principles. Yet for Higgins, true biblical Christianity required a severe commitment from those who wanted to be called followers of Christ.

Sanctuary was me doing my part to bring about the Kingdom of God here on this earth. Christianity that waits for paradise in Heaven is intended to maintain a capitalist status quo.¹⁴¹

Higgins’s experience in El Salvador led him to continue the mission once he was back in the United States. He worked with several organizations in the same realm as the Sanctuary Movement, such as Jubilee Partners in Georgia. Like Sanctuary workers in Arizona, Jubilee Partners helped to expedite the safe movement of Salvadorans and Guatemalans out of the United States to Canada where they were more likely to be granted asylum.¹⁴² Higgins represents the radical side of Sanctuary, in that he traveled to El Salvador and directly aided the FMLN in the 1980s. It was during this decade that he began to self-identify as a communist, believing in the power of the *Comunidades* and liberation theology as the basis of a spiritual and political revolution.

¹⁴⁰ Jeff Higgins, Interview with author, Wimberley, Texas, April 27, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Higgins, Interview.

¹⁴² Higgins, Interview.

John Blatz

John Blatz had a history of religious pilgrimage in the 1970s before his life-changing trip to El Salvador. His work with the Little Brothers of the Poor in France convinced him of the necessity to combine the spiritual and political realms to facilitate true change in this world. However, it was not until he spent time in Central America that he was ready to engage fully in the struggle. In the late 1970s he took a trip to El Salvador, where he joined in the work of Maryknollers and met Archbishop Romero. The young Blatz was influenced by the “prophetic voice” of Bishop John Fitzpatrick, a leader in the Catholic Church of South Texas.¹⁴³ Fitzpatrick was a vocal critic of the neutral stance and lack of decisive action from his own denomination in the United States on issues like nuclear proliferation, military interventionism in Latin America, and poverty.

Blatz concurred with Fitzpatrick that the Church must take seriously its position as the rightful leader of social justice movements worldwide. The bishop’s desire to see a less-hierarchical ministry model in his own diocese dovetailed nicely with the growth of the Basic Christian Communities emerging in Latin America. Similar to the Latin American Church, the Catholic Church in the United States was facing a shortage of trained priests. A pragmatic solution seemed to be the implementation of CEBs throughout South Texas, particularly as more Christians from the United States were exposed to this model of ministry.¹⁴⁴

In El Salvador, Blatz worked closely with the Maryknoller mission and therefore was able to see the unique way that *Comunidades* allowed Salvadorans to organize themselves spiritually, economically, and politically. He was enthralled with the

¹⁴³ John Blatz, Interview with Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Blatz, Interview.

grassroots nature of the Bible studies and cooperatives formed to improve the financial strength of *campesinos* involved in agriculture. While working closely with the Maryknollers, Blatz ran afoul of the military authorities of the Salvadoran junta. Rounded up with other American volunteers, Blatz was taken in for questioning by the National Guard. Understandably nervous because they were aware of the fate of others who were considered a threat based on their involvement with *Comunidades*, Blatz and the others awaited judgment and possible death.

The Americans waited outside in the sweltering humidity as the National Guardsmen informed their superior officers of their suspicions. The regiment's captain then questioned the volunteers for what seemed like hours. On this particular evening the volunteers were only threatened to stop their work with the people of El Salvador. As the Americans departed, the captain unleashed a vitriolic attack on the Maryknollers organization, calling them troublemakers of the worst kind who were all "communist organizers."¹⁴⁵

In San Salvador, Blatz was fortunate to be able to meet Archbishop Romero and the encounter would have an enduring impact. After returning to the U.S., Blatz was in New York when he heard the news of Romero's assassination. He recalled being shocked, not at the death of Romero, but at the relative silence of the Church in the United States about his death. While Vatican II showed a desire on the part of Catholicism to do more for the impoverished peoples of the world, their reticence following the death of Romero and others in Central America showed a streak of traditionalism that would not be eradicated easily. The torturous murders of the

¹⁴⁵ Blatz, Interview.

Maryknoller sisters made a larger impact nationally due perhaps to the sensationalistic nature of the crimes. Taken together, the martyrdom of these individuals sparked something in Blatz that he would utilize during his involvement in the Sanctuary Movement. Blatz worked as an attorney for the cause, something he continues to do in the present with a nonprofit called the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES).¹⁴⁶ In the mid-1980s, his wife Stacey Merkt was convicted of human smuggling as part of the U.S. government's crackdown on the Sanctuary Movement. She served a brief sentence for the crime, but the couple continued their activism on behalf of Central American refugees.

Yvonne Dilling

Finally, Yvonne Dilling represents another American Christian whose experience in Central America furthered a sincere desire to change the dire situation in the region. Dilling co-authored a book about her journey to Central America, the communities of faith she witnessed there, and the plight of Salvadoran refugees. *In Search of Refuge* was published in 1984 and chronicles events in El Salvador during the civil war from the point of view of an American Christian.¹⁴⁷ The book contributed to the growing awareness in congregations of U.S. interventionism and the refugee crisis it spawned. With the surge in religiously inspired protests by Christians who shared her outlook, Yvonne Dilling's story allows for clearer understanding of the link between faith and progressive religious activism during the 1980s.

¹⁴⁶ Blatz, Interview.

¹⁴⁷ Yvonne Dilling and Ingrid Rogers, *In Search of Refuge* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984).

Dilling in many ways was the ideal candidate for missional work in Central America and in the later formation of activist groups focused on U.S. foreign policy. She spoke Spanish and possessed a strong background of academic knowledge about the history of Latin America. As a student, she read excerpts from Vatican II and the Medellín Conference of Bishops for her own edification. Raised in the Brethren Church of Indiana, her Christian faith led her to El Salvador in search of how best to help those suffering as a result of government oppression, poverty, and foreign military intervention by her own country.¹⁴⁸ The Brethren Church is part of the Mennonite faith tradition, with Christians who believe they have a religious duty to make the world a more just and peaceful place. Mennonite dedication to social justice did not prevent its members from pursuing evangelism abroad, so mission-minded individuals like Yvonne Dilling saw their purpose in Central America as dualistic.¹⁴⁹ She spent eighteen months living among the refugees who fled their villages in El Salvador as they attempted to survive in desperate circumstances across the border in neighboring Honduras.

Dilling was attracted to the *Comunidades* model and desired to see the ministry in practice in its original setting of Latin America. Unfortunately for her Salvadoran hosts and companions it was the practice of *Comunidades* that eventually drew unwanted attention from the National Guard. Visits from American missionaries and aid workers signaled the junta's defenders that possible insurgencies were organizing. Since the 1970s, the junta viewed all religious organizations, Bible study groups, and even listening

¹⁴⁸ Dilling and Rogers, *In Search of Refuge*, 14.

¹⁴⁹ A.J. Dueck, *The Mennonite Brethren Church around the World: Celebrating 150 Years* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2010).

to the Mass via radio broadcast with increasing suspicion, evidenced by the martyrdom of Grande and Romero among so many others.

In a chilling remembrance detailed in her book, Dilling recounted the terror experienced by Salvadoran friends in 1981. One day in the mountain village of Santa Marta, troops rolled through in their heavy trucks and jeeps demanding to search all the homes to root out the rebels. The soldiers set certain homes on fire, shot livestock, burned food supplies, and then turned their attention to the bookshelves within selected homes. The National Guardsmen understood the importance of the Bible in the lives of many Salvadorans. They also recognized that *Comunidades* represented the most serious resistance to their authority and therefore the political viability of the junta and the economic dominance by the oligarchy.¹⁵⁰

With their rifles pressed to the throats of several women and their children, the soldiers demanded to know who owned the Bibles they found. They also wanted to know where the men were, since very often the villages during the day were only populated with small children and wives. That day, like so many others, the fathers and older sons were out working in the fields to make money to support their struggling families. Because the men were not present, the troops assumed that they were part of the FMLN or other militant insurgency groups. In addition to making threats of rape to the women in front of their children, the soldiers demanded to know if the families were involved in “subversive Bible studies.”¹⁵¹ The women and children of Santa Marta were terrified, but fortunately not physically harmed that day. With such occurrences happening more frequently, it was clear as the National Guard departed from Santa Marta that

¹⁵⁰ Dilling, *In Search of Refuge*, 13.

¹⁵¹ Dilling, 13.

Salvadorans who were engaged in *Comunidades* would live in constant peril for the duration of the decade if they remained in their homeland.

Dilling returned to the United States in 1983 and was diagnosed with cancer, causing her to suspend further trips to El Salvador for a brief time. However, her health challenges did not deter her activism to bring attention to the deteriorating situation in Central America. Like other progressive Christians of her day, Dilling believed strongly in the need to speak out against her own government's role in the suffering of the people she came to know intimately in El Salvador.

The Sanctuary Movement and the protests of Christians against American military involvement in Latin America was a theological response to the politics of U.S. foreign policy. It was through the lens of a justice-oriented view of the Gospels. We were called to help the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee. Those of us with an awareness of the situation had no way to react but to stand up and speak out.¹⁵²

At age 27, Dilling used her experience helping refugees in El Salvador and Honduras to help found a new Christian philanthropic organization, Witness for Peace. Members from a variety of Christian denominations joined together to persuade the U.S. government to change its course in Latin America during the Cold War. The people involved in the ecumenical Witness for Peace saw their actions as an integral part of the broader Sanctuary Movement. As they understood the situation, the repression employed by the junta in El Salvador directly contributed to the current refugee crisis along their nation's southern border. The brutality of the death squads would not be possible without the ongoing support of the United States government. To best aid refugees, Witness for Peace worked to stop them from needing to leave their homeland in the first place.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Yvonne Dilling, Interview with Author, Wimberley, Texas, December 2, 2020.

¹⁵³ Dilling, Interview.

The time spent in the region left Yvonne Dilling aware of the ongoing suffering of the Salvadoran people. She recognized that volunteerism in refugee camps would never sufficiently meet all of the challenges faced by the people she had encountered for the past eighteen months. Even with increasing human and material resources by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian aid groups, the social, economic, and political problems in El Salvador were overwhelming. At the end of her time there, she realized that direct and persistent action by people of faith in the United States was the only thing to possibly make a difference for the long-suffering Salvadoran people.

In the 1980s, Christians like Dilling, Fife, Mueller, and others began a new work to fulfill the Kingdom of God through their energetic work in the Sanctuary Movement and related causes. As these Christians labored to realize fully their vision of the Kingdom, they pushed back against the dominant interpretation of their faith in the culture in which they lived. To these progressives, postwar American Christianity had moved far from its original calling and had to be reinvigorated to remain relevant. Speaking out against unjust wars, inhumane refugee policies, and discriminatory social hierarchies required uncomfortable deconstruction and reconstruction of these individuals' faiths. Their desire to follow Christian discipleship contributed significantly to the growth of the Sanctuary Movement and its' outgrowths Casa Romero and Witness for Peace. Even when their actions alienated them from friends and family or brought legal and financial trouble, they remained steadfast in their dedication to the cause.

4. WORK OF FAITH: THE ACTIVISM OF THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus, also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”¹⁵⁴

James 2:14-17

“It seemed, in fact, that we were ‘gifted’ during this time. A robust community of religious and secular people saw what was happening in Central America and along the U.S.-Mexico border and took action. Delegations and the media were drawn to Casa Romero along with the constant flow of newly arriving refugees...if the government’s intent was to dissuade Americans from taking action on behalf of Central American refugees, it failed.”¹⁵⁵

Jack Elder

In early July 1980 authorities made a grisly discovery in the Sonoran Desert in the borderlands between Arizona and Mexico. Thirteen Salvadoran migrants were found dead from dehydration and heat exhaustion. The few survivors were rushed to a nearby hospital and eventually detained as undocumented immigrants. The story made national headlines and helped draw Americans’ attention to the related issues of undocumented immigration and the bloody conflict raging throughout much of Central America.¹⁵⁶ In southern Arizona, near Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument where the migrants were found, Jim Corbett and John Fife viewed these deaths as wholly preventable. With the support of thousands of religious allies throughout the United States and Canada, Corbett and Fife spent the next decade laboring to keep such tragedies from occurring again.

¹⁵⁴ James 2:14-16, *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 389.

¹⁵⁵ Jack Elder, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, July 5, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Al Senia, “13 Salvadorans Found Dead in Sonoran Desert,” *Washington Post*, July 7, 1980. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/07/13-smuggled-salvadorans-found-dead-in-us-desert/06e736ff-07bd-4cc2-8695-374f839278ea/>

Awareness of the plight of refugees increased among progressive Christians by 1980 and spurred activism on multiple domestic fronts. In Arizona, the Tucson Ecumenical Council (TEC) began to hold prayer vigils and marches as a form of peaceful protest against U.S. interventionism in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and other Central American countries. To the Christians involved in TEC efforts to draw attention to it, the current refugee crisis was a direct result of U.S. military and political involvement. The early momentum from Tucson diffused eventually to other metropolitan areas throughout the United States. Around the country, from Tucson to Minneapolis and Atlanta, thousands of Christians from various Christian denominations, along with people from other faiths, marched and prayed to demonstrate their opposition to U.S. policy in the region.¹⁵⁷

While the TEC Task Force on Central America drew the lion's share of media attention and increasing government scrutiny, they were not the only dedicated people of faith doing such work. In San Benito, Texas on the outskirts of the border city of Brownsville, Christians busied themselves providing shelter at Casa Oscar Romero for the refugees who had recently crossed the border. Named for Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran martyr, Casa Romero was established to aid people fleeing the violence in Central America with a similar mission to the Sanctuary Movement in Arizona. In both cases, thousands of vulnerable individuals and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras passed through their ministries and were given an opportunity to find safety and stability.

¹⁵⁷ Phil M. Shenk, "An Ecumenical Outpouring: Unified Church Opposition to U.S. El Salvador policy," *Sojourners*, June 1981, 38.

Activism by Christians in both Arizona and Texas increased public awareness of the crisis in Central America courtesy of the press. Newspaper articles and reports on evening news broadcasts told the stories of the protests and vigils but did nothing to alleviate the suffering of Central Americans in the war zone or in the borderlands. To realize actual changes to U.S. refugee policy and foreign policy, the TEC's strategy changed dramatically over the course of the decade. Fife acknowledged that the movement had to become more political and confrontational with their tactics, concluding that picket signs and prayers were not enough "when poor people's lives (were) hanging in the balance."¹⁵⁸

The Tucson Ecumenical Council Task Force on Central America

Prior to the origin of the Sanctuary Movement, the Tucson Ecumenical Council had a history of activism on social justice and civil rights issues. During the 1960s and 1970s, the TEC's Catholic and Protestant members worked diligently on a variety of worthy causes. From school desegregation to securing better treatment and wages for agricultural and mining workers in the Southwest, the TEC developed a reputation for putting their faith into action. The coalition formed as a way for Catholics and Protestants to dialogue constructively about theological issues, but quickly moved past that historical obstacle as they embraced a cooperative and progressive model for activism on the pressing social, economic, and political issues of the day.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Mariana Dale, "Church Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s Revived in Tucson," *The Republic*, August 24, 2014. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2014/08/22/church-sanctuary-movement-s-revived-tucson/14471415/>.

¹⁵⁹ John Fife, Interview with Author, Wimberley, Texas, December 16, 2020.

In response to the crisis in Central America and the dangerous migrations spawned by warfare in that region, the TEC leadership settled upon a new direction by 1981. Witnessing a constant stream of Central American refugees into southern Arizona prompted the formation of the Tucson Ecumenical Council Task Force on Central America by summer of that year. The Task Force pooled its limited resources and dedicated its volunteer workers to provide aid for any Central American fleeing violence and persecution.¹⁶⁰

The primary goal of the Task Force in its initial phase was to prevent the deportation of Central Americans seeking political asylum in the United States. In meetings with refugees, Task Force members realized that many faced deadly consequences if they were forced to return to their homeland. Stories of deportees met at the airport by junta or paramilitary forces were common among the refugees. Refugees informed the TEC of corpses strewn about the roads to and from the airport in San Salvador, serving as a warning to those who attempted escape.¹⁶¹ With the collective knowledge of the steady flow of migrants risking their own deaths in the Sonoran Desert as well as the deaths of Father Grande, Archbishop Romero, and the Maryknoll Sisters, Task Force members labored to connect refugees with legal support in their quest for political asylum.

The Task Force employed a strategy in the early days of the Sanctuary Movement to help convince potential volunteers of the worthiness of the cause. This plan involved

¹⁶⁰ Miriam Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 48.

¹⁶¹ Myra MacPherson, "Caught in the Storm of Sanctuary" *Washington Post*, March 12, 1985. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1985/03/12/caught-in-the-storm-of-sanctuary/ba04c62b-84fa-4c23-937a-582edda5695d/>.

frequent car or bus trips with congregants from TEC affiliated churches and religious organizations to El Centro, a detention center along the California-Arizona border. El Centro was populated with undocumented migrants, mostly from Central America and Mexico, who spent their days awaiting a hearing from immigration authorities.

Conditions at the detention center were miserable by all accounts. The cells were overcrowded, food and water were lacking, and detainees were forced to spend long hours during the day in a “corral” which provided no shade from the desert sun.¹⁶² The Task Force on Central America maximized the El Centro trips by organizing detainees while simultaneously raising funds for their efforts to protect Salvadorans from rapid deportation.¹⁶³ In the minds of the TEC visitors, the government installation seemed to have one goal: to convince migrating Central Americans to never attempt to cross the border again at the risk of ending up in El Centro. When sympathetic Christians witnessed for themselves the deplorable conditions of El Centro and learned of the terrible fate awaiting most deportees, many became dedicated volunteers in the early years of the Sanctuary Movement.¹⁶⁴

While the legal aid strategy of the Task Force was well intentioned, it failed for several reasons. Attorneys hired by the TEC argued that the migrants from El Salvador were in the United States to seek political asylum due to the persecution they faced in

¹⁶² John Fife, Interview. El Centro was overcrowded based on eyewitness accounts, with hundreds more detainees than the facility was designed to house. During the day, men were held outside in a “corral” with no shade from the hot desert sun. Temperatures reached over 115 degrees consistently in the months of May to September. Food and water were meager, and sleeping conditions were poor due to the cramped cells and lack of ventilation.

¹⁶³ The Tucson Ecumenical Council Legal Aid (TECLA) benefited from the numerous trips to El Centro. Donations to TECLA increased following El Centro visits. Combined with the funding provided by the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), TECLA had resources to fight deportation of Central Americans.

¹⁶⁴ Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart*, 50.

their homeland. Evidence of rape, torture, execution, conscription into paramilitary outfits or the National Guard, and other wartime atrocities was demonstrated clearly in American immigration courts. The limited time and resources of the TEC meant that most refugees never received legal representation. Consequently, most refugees were deported without knowledge of how to even apply for political asylum.¹⁶⁵

Another barrier to their legal strategy was an issue of political optics. The Refugee Act of 1980 declared that to obtain asylum in the United States, “aliens must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion.”¹⁶⁶ The argument that Salvadorans were political asylees ran counter to the Reagan administration’s Cold War foreign policy priorities, prompting the inconsistent application of the Refugee Act.

The United States, typical of its foreign policy decisions in the postwar years, backed El Salvador’s conservative junta and opposed any group or movement allied against them. Like the reactionary Salvadoran leadership, the U.S. government accused opposition parties of being part of a Soviet-Cuban alliance whose goal was to destabilize the region and promote a Marxist revolutionary agenda.¹⁶⁷ Since El Salvador’s government enjoyed political and economic support from the United States along with generous and consistent American military aid, granting refugee status to people fleeing the country made for a very poor optic. For this reason, the United States government maintained that Salvadorans were simply “economic migrants” fleeing a desperate financial situation. While they deserved pity and donations, Salvadorans did not fit the

¹⁶⁵ Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar*, 28-29.

¹⁶⁶ Refugee Act of 1980 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-94/pdf/STATUTE-94-Pg102.pdf>.

¹⁶⁷ Ferris, *Central American Refugees*, 118.

current American definition of “refugee” during the 1980s.¹⁶⁸ Between 1980 and 1982, over 20,000 Salvadorans were deported from the United States. Of those, approximately 6000 had filed asylum claims with the U.S. government.¹⁶⁹

Inevitably, the U.S. government’s hardline with its interpretation of the Refugee Act of 1980 caused the vast majority of Salvadoran asylum cases to end in deportation. The United States government utilized the Refugee Act to maintain flexibility concerning foreign policy needs that would likely change over time. According to the rules, people displaced by war, civil strife, or natural disasters did not qualify automatically as refugees. Fleeing from a “generalized climate of terror and violence” was distinct from having “specific threats on one’s life.”¹⁷⁰

Using a narrow qualification with such flexibility still allowed for certain foreign nationals to qualify under Reagan’s parameters in the 1980s. Cubans fleeing from Castro’s Communist regime were welcomed to the United States, as were Iranians escaping the violence of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.¹⁷¹ Vietnamese refugees, along with other Southeast Asians, also enjoyed asylum in the United States during the 1980s. The rationale of the U.S. government was consistent with all three groups. Cubans, Iranians, and Vietnamese migrants arrived from lands with governments who had either fought wars against the U.S. or staged revolutions to force American interests out.¹⁷² The United States’ deployment of its economic, political, and military interventionism

¹⁶⁸ Ferris, 111.

¹⁶⁹ Christina Ravashiere, “Salvador Refugees: Shipped from US Back into Civil War at ‘Home,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1982.

¹⁷⁰ Crittendon, *Sanctuary*, 22-24.

¹⁷¹ Crittendon, 22-23.

¹⁷² Adam Roberts, “Refugees and Military Intervention,” in *Refugees and International Relations* eds. Gil Loescher and Laila Monahan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 215.

fostered significant migrations globally, forcing the U.S. to wield alternately accommodating and restrictionist asylum policies throughout the Cold War. Defeated by the draconian approach of the Refugee Act toward Central Americans, The Tucson Ecumenical Council Task Force was flustered. Months of failure at legal redress left the TEC floundering and looking for another way to help those whom they believed God had placed in their care.

Sanctuary at Southside and Beyond

With numerous visits to El Centro failing to prevent deportations and countless discussions concerning the deteriorating situation in El Salvador, Southside Church decided to chart a new and controversial course going forward. The congregation and their pastor John Fife were foundational in the formation of the TEC Task Force on Central America, and in 1982 Southside voted to open its doors to Sanctuary refugees. In a strong show of solidarity with Salvadorans and the cause of social justice for them, just two members voted against the motion.¹⁷³ Even with such strong support from his congregation, Reverend Fife was convinced that Southside should not go it alone in the work of Sanctuary. Capitalizing on his connections with the TEC and his leadership role in the Presbyterian Church, he invited other area churches to be involved. This decision was a natural one for Reverend Fife, as his friend Corbett was already housing at least twenty refugees on his property at the time.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ David Bird, "Minister Describes Origin of Work with Aliens," *New York Times*, May 3, 1986, 8.

¹⁷⁴ Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 64-66.

I remember in September or October of 1981, Jim Corbett came to me and braced me, then told me that nobody is getting asylum if they are from El Salvador. It's all because of the Refugee Act...political asylum was not designed for our (U.S.) allies...We need to turn this into a shelter for them to try and get them out of this area and eventually to freedom somewhere else. That is when it turned into us helping them cross the border.¹⁷⁵

Sanctuary leaders stated boldly and publicly what their mission was and why they felt it was a spiritual matter for them. The cause, Fife maintained, had to “get out in front of the controversy” so that they could frame Sanctuary to their advantage, thus preventing the U.S. government from branding them as mere criminals engaged in human smuggling.¹⁷⁶ Told from the wrong perspective in a country with a fairly xenophobic history regarding immigration, Fife knew that charges of “human smuggling” would be difficult to overcome in the public eye regardless of the religious motivation of those involved.

As Southside Church and other congregations affiliated with the TEC Task Force undertook this daring new mission, Fife continued with his plan to inform both the public and the U.S. government of their intentions. In an open letter to Reagan's Attorney General William French Smith, Fife informed the government of Southside's plans to harbor refugees. In verbiage reminiscent of the martyred hero, Oscar Romero, Fife recalled a favorite passage from the Old Testament book of Micah to explain the goal of the Sanctuary Movement to the government of the United States.

¹⁷⁵ Fife, Interview.

¹⁷⁶ Fife, Interview.

...We take this action because we believe that the current policy and practice of the United States Government with regard to Central American refugees is illegal and immoral...We beg you in the name of God, to do justice and love mercy in the administration of your office...Until such time, we will not cease to extend the sanctuary of the church to undocumented people from Central America. Obedience to God requires this of all of us.¹⁷⁷

Reverend Fife's statement declared the innocence before God of those who engaged in the ministry of Sanctuary. The United States government was the one facing judgment for its own immoral and inconsistently applied policies toward Central American refugees. This articulate framing of Sanctuary by Fife and others was done to demonstrate the movement as acting in good faith to help desperate people, all because of the misapplication of the Refugee Act and the disastrous foreign policy of the U.S. in places like El Salvador. The public disclosure was designed to bring negative attention upon the government of the United States for its refugee policy and ongoing military intervention in Central America, a tactic that Sanctuary would continue doing throughout the 1980s.

By rooting the Sanctuary Movement's work with Central American refugees firmly in the scriptures, Fife underscored both the religiosity of the struggle and the movement's possession of the moral high ground. In its previous civil rights work, the TEC used a combination of Old Testament prophets and the teachings of Jesus to defend their frequently controversial positions. Turning again to these tools in their mission to aid refugees, the leadership of the TEC knew to emphasize the teachings of the Bible to make their congregations and the public aware of the theological basis for their actions. Sanctuary's leaders acknowledged that laws were broken in the process but proclaimed

¹⁷⁷ Hilary Cunningham, *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xi.

that they had a religious obligation to provide shelter to the alien and the foreigner in their midst. The religious context was key.

On taking such drastic measures to help these vulnerable refugees, Fife accepted wisdom imparted to him by a rabbi he knew from the TEC. The rabbi told Fife that Torah emphasized at least 37 times that people were to “love the alien” among themselves. God knew, said the rabbi, that people would truly struggle with following that particular commandment, so it was placed in there over and over again to force humans to accept it.¹⁷⁸ In this new mission, Southside Church enjoyed the support of their denomination. The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) was critical of the United States’ militarism in the region and supported Christians working to provide all types of relief to the refugees caught in the middle. Several decades earlier, it would have been difficult to foresee such support for the Sanctuary Movement from the PCUSA denomination, but it reflected several decades of developments within the denomination’s progressive theological stance on the major issues of the day.

Presbyterian Progressivism

Like the progression of the Catholic Church on social issues following Vatican II and Medellín, Presbyterians evolved throughout the twentieth century before the Sanctuary Movement. Presbyterians had been active missionaries in Central America since the late nineteenth century, with work centered exclusively on evangelism and discipleship. At that time, most Presbyterian missionaries who served in the region felt that economic philosophies, political ideologies, and social stratification were best

¹⁷⁸ Fife, Interview.

abdicated to politicians. During the early twentieth century this aspect of Presbyterian missiology shifted in a progressive direction, with some PCUSA missionaries proclaiming that part of their labor in nations such as Guatemala should include “social improvements” among their flock.¹⁷⁹ Their language was grounded in the positivism of the postwar era. The PCUSA Board of Foreign Missions stated that their presence in Central America would “reform (these) societies” but no direct action was required. Rather, simply by their presence in Latin American society, reforms would occur.¹⁸⁰

By the 1960s, such passive efforts at social reform lost their appeal to missionaries within the PCUSA, with many who labored in Central America understanding the appeal of revolution due to the crises faced by the people of the region. Though missionaries abroad understood the dire situation and advocated for a thorough reform of the social, economic, and political realms, most Presbyterians in the pews back home were predominantly conservative.¹⁸¹ Regardless of the home front, a change took place in the mission field within the PCUSA and other mainline denominations during the 1960s and 1970s. Missionaries understood that the entrenched systems of inequality and oppression took centuries to construct and would not come down without a fight. The awakening of Protestant missionaries abroad facilitated liberalization at home during this period, evidenced by the support for progressive social and economic causes in the U.S. in the ensuing decades.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Karla Ann Koll, “Presbyterians, the United States, and Central America: Background of the 1980s Debate,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-_), Spring 2000, Vol. 78, No. 1, 89.

¹⁸⁰ Koll, “Presbyterians,” 89.

¹⁸¹ Koll, 93.

¹⁸² Recent scholarship on the subject of the growth of liberalism within Protestant mainline denominations has argued that it developed outside the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Exposure to the problems in the developing world related to centuries of imperialism and exploitation fostered anti-colonial perspectives within the worldviews of many missionaries, who then

On social issues, the postwar years witnessed a pull to the left for the PCUSA and other mainline churches. Themes of liberation and democratization of church hierarchies were common in liberal Protestant denominations, like the United Church of Christ, American Lutheran Church, and the United Methodist Church. As part of the World Council of Churches, the Presbyterian denomination embraced a model of ministry similar to the one practiced in Central America during the same period. Christians from liberal or progressive churches called for an “ethic of revolutionary Christian humanism” designed to improve the existing world order.¹⁸³ Conservative evangelicals within these bodies fought back, demanding that conversions should remain the focus of all missions abroad. These believers argued back to the progressives that social reforms without Christ as the head of the society would be fruitless exercises in the end.

By the 1980s, progressives within the PCUSA moved even closer to supporting efforts in Central America to usher in revolutionary reforms, although they fell short of endorsing violent revolution. With a successful revolution in Nicaragua and mounting insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala, Presbyterian leadership voiced their support for liberation movements in a religious context.

imported that understanding of world events and religion to the United States when they returned home. Many missionaries grew weary of the frustration of making converts when so many of the peoples of Southeast Asia, Africa, and India harbored very strong bias against Westerners and their colonial religion. Missionaries frequently changed tactics and allowed for syncretic Christianity to be practiced with their converts, or gave up religious conversions altogether and opted for educational and social reform work instead. For an excellent review of the impact that foreign missionaries had on denominational progressivism in the twentieth century, see Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), and Ian Tyrrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁸³ *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Held in Uppsala 4 - 20 July 1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 32.

The reconciliation of humankind through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation. Because Jesus himself identified with the poor and exploited, the cause of the world's poor is the cause of his disciples.¹⁸⁴

The PCUSA denomination grew increasingly vocal throughout the decade of the 1980s, even voting as a body to condemn the policies of the United States in Central America while they pledged support to refugees.¹⁸⁵ With support from his congregation, the denomination, and the various denominations represented by the Tucson Ecumenical Council, Reverend Fife took charge of the mission of providing Sanctuary to thousands of refugees for the next decade. As evidence of the ecumenical composition of the movement, within a few years Sanctuary expanded nationwide to over 300 different mainline churches and synagogues across the nation willing to help in the mission to prevent more suffering and deaths.¹⁸⁶

Sanctuary in Action

Using Southside Church as the new headquarters for the TEC's Sanctuary Movement, Fife and his fellow workers busied themselves helping Central American refugees cross international borders and find new homes in either the United States or Canada. Congregations who joined the effort supplied drivers and automobiles, typically making "single leg journeys" from Phoenix to Los Angeles or Albuquerque to Denver.¹⁸⁷ Sanctuary drivers transported families and individuals to cities where another driver took

¹⁸⁴ Koll, "Presbyterians," 99.

¹⁸⁵ Christian Iosso, "Study Team Looks at Causes Contributing to Border Crisis," *Presbyterian News Service*, May 6, 2019 <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/study-team-looks-at-causes-contributing-to-border-crisis/>.

¹⁸⁶ David Bird, "Minister," 8.

¹⁸⁷ Fife, Interview.

over. Brief car trips lasting less than a day allowed for more volunteers to be involved since the trips were typically short; this strategy also allowed for a minimization of risk to participants.

As the movement diffused across the Southwest and eventually all the U.S., Fife and Corbett took steps to organize their twentieth century adaptation of the Underground Railroad. Using a roadmap of the continental United States, the leadership established cities along the highways and back roads that would serve as connecting points for its drivers. Eventually distant metropolitan areas like Chicago and Washington, D.C. became major hubs within the network.¹⁸⁸ Most of the workers and churches who contributed to the efforts of the cause of Sanctuary were, like Fife's own denomination, liberal and had a history of social justice and civil rights work. Part of the American Baptist Church denomination, University Baptist Church of Seattle adopted progressive stances on the social and political controversies of the era.¹⁸⁹ University Baptist Church was an early adopter of Sanctuary, taking in refugees starting in 1982 with charges brought against them in 1985 for human smuggling.¹⁹⁰ The church's proximity to Canada allowed for their congregation helping thousands of Salvadorans cross over the border for an improved chance at receiving asylum. Churches, temples, and synagogues across the United States joined the Sanctuary Movement, relying on their faith traditions to guide them in a novel and inherently complicated model of religious activism.

¹⁸⁸ Fife, Interview.

¹⁸⁹ The American Baptist tradition should not be confused with the more traditional and conservative Southern Baptist Church. Southern Baptists split from other Baptists during the antebellum period and the contentious fight over the morality of slavery.

¹⁹⁰ <http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv10612#IDAYBSMD>.

Casa Oscar Romero in San Benito, Texas

With Jim Corbett and John Fife's leadership and support growing exponentially throughout much of the U.S., the Sanctuary Movement continued its controversial mission. With Fife leading the base at Tucson and responsible for the congregation at Southside, that left Corbett to be the main recruitment agent. He traveled extensively in the 1980s informing secular and religious audiences and the media of the serious situation in Central America and the role of the U.S. in the region.¹⁹¹

The recruitment tour paid dividends quickly. One new worker in the cause of Sanctuary was a teacher from Texas who joined specifically because of Corbett's cross-country publicity campaign. Jack Elder became involved in the movement through a chance encounter in 1982. A graduate student in Spanish and History at Southwest Texas State University, Elder attended an event during Central America Week on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. There he listened intently to Corbett, the featured speaker that evening. Captivated by the man and his message of the "scriptural and legal mandates" to aid refugees, Elder found himself inching toward joining a cause he knew little about prior to Corbett's speech.¹⁹² Common to many other stories of those involved in Sanctuary, much of Elder's faith journey up to that point in his life had been about providing personal shelter from the hard things of this world. He did not consider himself a religious person, though he was familiar with the basic tenets of the Christian faith. After hearing Corbett exhort the audience to action on behalf of Central American

¹⁹¹ Davidson, *Convictions of the Heart*, 96.

¹⁹² Jack Elder, Interview by Author, Wimberley, Texas, August 5, 2020.

refugees, Elder experienced a spiritual rebirth and consequently joined the movement and embraced all aspects of its now controversial activism.¹⁹³

Elder's transformation from a moderate and compliant Christian faith to a more public and confrontational faith expression is representative of thousands of other Americans during the 1980s. Christians who were aware of their own government's policies and actions in Central America experienced an awakening that prompted some to engage in the Sanctuary Movement in spite of the resultant legal and financial problems. The challenge of Sanctuary compelled such Christians to respond to a spiritual and political calling, with those who joined emboldened to put their faith into action on behalf of some of the most vulnerable people in the world.

Relative to other key figures in Sanctuary, Elder's exposure to the issues of poverty and oppression happened later in his life. A comfortable childhood and relative affluence left him, as a young man, desirous of more from life. He served as a volunteer in the Peace Corps before being drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. Raised in a nominally Christian home with Methodist and Catholic influences, Elder rarely attended worship services with any denomination during his time overseas. While he was admittedly apathetic religiously during the 1960s, Elder focused most of his time and energy on the subjects of history and politics. In his research, he read about aspects of U.S. foreign policy that unsettled him greatly. Many of Sanctuary's leaders started with a strong theological base but lacked knowledge of events in Central America. Elder was quite the opposite. He knew a great deal about U.S. tactics during the Cold War but did not understand how theology could relate to that subject. Until that evening with Corbett

¹⁹³ Elder, Interview.

nothing connected for him on a spiritual level. Elder's religiously inspired activism began in earnest because as he put it, a "philosopher goat-herder and activist" from Arizona said that it was time for Christians to act.¹⁹⁴ After Central America Week at UT-Austin, Elder possessed a new sense of deep conviction that God's will for his life involved taking significant risks for the sake of others.

It was Jim's words that brought my wife, my three boys, and me to the borderlands of Texas. Here was a mechanism (Sanctuary) with its scriptural foundation and the willingness of congregations of all stripes to tackle the challenge. It became impossible for me to stay neutral when I learned of Romero and the Maryknollers being tortured, raped, and murdered...it was impossible to ignore the growing whirlwind of violence.¹⁹⁵

Elder soon moved from a position of sympathy for Salvadorans to a position of solidarity with them.¹⁹⁶

In the spring of 1983, the Elder family moved to San Benito, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley to work at Casa Oscar Romero. As a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Brownsville, Casa Oscar Romero took in newly arrived refugees from Central America and provided shelter during their asylum process. With his experience in the Peace Corps and the military, Elder was appointed director of the shelter. For the next two years, Elder worked diligently on behalf of the people who came to Casa Romero. Most of the people emigrated from the war zones of El Salvador or Guatemala, sites where the worst violence was known to be perpetrated on civilian populations.¹⁹⁷ There were times when the shelter and its resources were overwhelmed numerically, as upwards of 100 migrants

¹⁹⁴ Jack Elder, Interview.

¹⁹⁵ Jack Elder, Interview.

¹⁹⁶ Elder, Interview.

¹⁹⁷ Renny Golden, "Sanctuary: Churches Take Part in a New Underground Railroad," *Sojourners*, December 24, 1982, 24-26.

arrived throughout the day.¹⁹⁸ Just like its ally in Arizona, Casa Romero workers eventually moved beyond provision of temporary shelter for Central American asylees. Soon Jack Elder and others transported refugees to other cities in their personal vehicles, all while hoping to avoid detection by the Border Patrol.¹⁹⁹

Originally built as a neighborhood bar, Casa Romero had humble origins. However, by the time Elder took charge, the halfway house stretched over a city block with a community garden, a communal kitchen, and a laundry facility for its short-term occupants to use.²⁰⁰ Support from Bishop John Fitzpatrick provided a degree of religious credibility to the work at Casa Romero. Similar to Sanctuary in Arizona, religious support did not equate to understanding from the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Bishop Fitzpatrick was cautious with his endorsement of Casa Romero's activities, since authorities had already started watching their staff and were actively monitoring all activities at the shelter.

What I have advocated as a Christian: taking care of, feeding, helping them make telephone calls to get in touch with their families. Our operation has not looked to transporting people, though a lot of our people do. A lot of our sisters and priests have helped Salvadorans get out of the Rio Grande Valley...I admire them, I'll be in the courtroom and I'll visit them in jail to show my solidarity, but I have not advocated that.²⁰¹

The bishop voiced what many in his diocese believed. The people crossing the border into the Rio Grande Valley were hungry, poor, thirsty, and worried for their lives. As a priest and the head of a large diocese in South Texas, Fitzpatrick advocated for a change

¹⁹⁸ David Seden, "Casa Romero Provides Shelter to Thousands Fleeing Central America," *Associated Press*, March 17, 1986.

¹⁹⁹ Elder, Interview.

²⁰⁰ Darcy Sprague, "Old School Activism: The Story of Jack Elder," Folo Media, July 28, 2017. <https://www.folomedia.org/old-school-activism-the-story-of-jack-elder/>.

²⁰¹ Carlyle Murphy, "Casa Romero: A Safe Port on the Texas Border," *Washington Post*, September 4, 1984.

in American policy but refused to offer his public support for any illegal activities. As Fitzpatrick saw it, the laws of the United States were the problem; this did not translate to his endorsement of transporting Central Americans throughout Texas or other states. Casa Romero, therefore, saw its mission as helping as many people as possible until such “un-American” laws on asylum for refugees could be changed.²⁰²

Officially, Casa Romero only helped recently arrived refugees by providing them with shelter, clothing, and food. Jack Elder and other workers took things a step further based upon their own personal theologies of liberation. Casa Romero workers, inspired by the example of priests like Grande and Romero and laypeople like Jim Corbett, started doing work that Elder described as “evasive services.”²⁰³ Similar to the methods of Fife, Corbett, and others in the Arizona movement, Elder and a few other Casa Romero volunteers drove Salvadorans to nearby cities for bus transportation out of the Rio Grande Valley. The main goal was to get them quickly away from the region with the most attention from the Border Patrol and Immigration and Naturalization Service. Refugees were driven to bus terminals in McAllen or Harlingen, Texas to escape the borderlands and find safer hiding places in northern cities.

Elder took extreme risks in doing the work of Sanctuary in Texas. The possibility of prison time and financial penalties certainly occurred to him, but his motivation remained anchored by his faith. The original inspiration provided by Corbett was amplified later by others. Yvonne Dilling’s book *In Search of Refuge* made an impact on Elder and others within the Casa Romero community, reminding them of the “suffering

²⁰² Murphy, “Casa Romero.”

²⁰³ Murphy, “Casa Romero.”

of Salvadorans and the need to lay down their own lives as Christ did for people.”²⁰⁴ Like the Sanctuary workers in Arizona, the significance of the emergent theologies emanating from Latin America was recognized by many who gave their time and resources to the mission of Casa Romero. From Bishop Fitzpatrick to the nuns and volunteers who staffed the shelter, the *Comunidades* model was central to their mission. To better serve those in his care at Casa Romero, Elder became a dedicated student of liberation theology and the CEB ministry model from the thousands of Salvadoran and Guatemalan Christians with whom he became acquainted.

Liberation theology and *Comunidades* were highly relevant to our work. Someone at the time suggested that U.S. faith communities were being evangelized from the South. Testimonies from Yvonne Dilling, who worked with refugees in Central America, and others pushed Christians on this side of the border to make central the idea of Base Communities for our work here...we did it in honor of the way such people lived their lives in service to others who were suffering along with those they helped.²⁰⁵

For Elder and his family, achieving this level of commitment included living and eating in close proximity with refugees. Using the Maryknoll “missioners” as an example, the staff and those they served were seen as equals in the service of God’s Kingdom. In essence, they constructed and maintained a unique incarnation of the *Comunidades* model at their shelter. For his salary as the director, Elder accepted a meager paycheck of \$375 per month.²⁰⁶ All that Jack Elder did at Casa Romero was an expression of his Christian faith and of his solidarity with the people of Central America. For Elder, Fife and other committed participants, such solidarity would lead to serious consequences down the line.

²⁰⁴ Elder, Interview with Author.

²⁰⁵ Elder, Interview.

²⁰⁶ Carlyle Murphy, “Casa Romero.”

Witness for Peace

As the national Sanctuary Movement continued its work to help refugees in the 1980s, another ecumenical movement began with the purpose of changing U.S. foreign policy objectives in Central America. In 1983, Americans from an assortment of progressive mainline denominations formed Witness for Peace. The organization's purpose was the use of shared religious values in the United States to pressure President Reagan and decision makers at the Pentagon into a complete cessation of American military interventionism in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala.²⁰⁷

A shared mission to alleviate the suffering of Central American refugees connected Sanctuary with Witness for Peace, though Witness for Peace tackled the cause while Sanctuary focused on the effect. Activists who joined Witness for Peace believed that their role in the broader Sanctuary Movement was the prevention of refugees in the first place. They understood their role was to force the United States to end their financial and military aid to right-wing governments and rebels. This action, they prayed, would lead to a major change in the dire situation in places like El Salvador. Their mission was to stop the funding and support of dictatorships and insurgencies so that Central Americans would not be forced to flee and find refuge elsewhere.²⁰⁸ Knowledge of the money, weapons, and training supplied to dictatorships or right-wing insurgencies were now public knowledge for many American citizens. Following the quagmire of the Vietnam War and dishonesty of the U.S. government exposed by the Pentagon Papers,

²⁰⁷ Jim Wallis, "Witness for Peace," *Sojourners*, November 1983.

²⁰⁸ Yvonne Dilling, Interview.

many Christians in the 1980s determined to not allow anything on that scale to occur again.²⁰⁹

Witness for Peace shared many connections with the Sanctuary Movement. Both movements had overlapping membership rosters, sharing a basic level of understanding of recent events in Central America and the U.S.'s role in destabilizing the various nations there. Many of the founders traveled extensively through Nicaragua during the period of the *Contra* insurgency or could testify personally to the brutality of the Salvadoran conflict.²¹⁰ With so many workers possessing first-hand knowledge of the crisis in Central America, Witness for Peace employed two strategies during the 1980s. Their first plan was intended to draw attention to the plight of Central Americans domestically with protests, vigils, and marches. Secondly, Witness for Peace volunteers traveled to Central America on "fact finding" trips that doubled as a way to protect people from violence.²¹¹ The second plan was very effective at providing churches back in the U.S. with incontrovertible evidence of the violence and dangerous situation that refugees lived through. It was also undoubtedly much more dangerous for the volunteers.

The role of progressivism in American churches during the 1980s cannot be overlooked. Churches that signed on to involvement in Sanctuary and Witness for Peace shared a history of working in the struggle for civil rights, expansion of voting rights, gender equality, nuclear non-proliferation, and reproductive rights.²¹² Fighting for the peace and security of Central America followed that same line of logic for most of the

²⁰⁹ Yvonne Dilling, Interview.

²¹⁰ Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 115.

²¹¹ Yvonne Dilling, Interview.

²¹² Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 127, 170-179.

people involved. Theologies of liberation and Basic Christian Communities appealed to many within both movements because of the emphasis on God's preference for the poor and marginalized. The mission of Witness for Peace was yet another way progressive Christians experienced the Kingdom of God in the midst of a deadly conflict.

Yvonne Dilling was a founding member and eventually served as a National Coordinator of Witness for Peace. Her experience in the early 1980s in the refugee camps of Central America gave her an excellent foundational understanding of the role that religion played in shaping the resistance to dictatorships. When she returned to the United States, Dilling was instrumental in starting the new movement that broadened the scope of Sanctuary to actually target the cause of Central American emigration. Witness for Peace counted on figures like Dilling to tell the truth about the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Central America. If the United States ended their financial and military aid to right-wing governments and rebels, Salvadorans and Guatemalans would not be forced to flee and seek asylum in North America.²¹³

To raise awareness of their government's role in the wars of Central America, Witness for Peace found inspiration from the 1960s and staged numerous vigils, marches, and protests across the nation. Recruitment for their movement in churches was robust, as progressive Christians were deeply unsettled by stories of U.S. involvement in training and arming the death squads made famous by the murders of the Maryknollers in El Salvador.²¹⁴ With the Sanctuary Movement publicizing the daily horror experienced by the refugees who were fortunate enough to have escaped, progressive Christians joined the Witness campaign by the thousands. Methodists,

²¹³ Yvonne Dilling, Interview.

²¹⁴ Jim Wallis, "Christians and Contras," *Sojourners*, October 1985.

Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Lutherans signed pledges of support while their denominations provided much needed financial backing.²¹⁵ From San Francisco to Washington, D.C. protesters marched and prayed for an end to interventionism in Central America.

Witness for Peace volunteers believed in the value of vigils and marches of course, but the more activist-minded among them traveled to Central America and served the people in a unique way. Knowing that the *Contras* of Nicaragua and the junta soldiers of El Salvador would not harass or kill people while Americans were close by, Witness for Peace workers thus became recognized by Central Americans as “human shields” in the 1980s.²¹⁶ Once the Witness volunteers returned home, they called on their representatives in Congress and informed them of their experiences, many of which involved close calls with death squads. Dilling recalled how her experience near the front lines with refugees nourished her activism.

Of course, we spoke up as loudly as we could collectively. I had encounters, as did many others who traveled in El Salvador and Nicaragua then, with soldiers and helicopters that scared us to death. We knew it was our tax dollars paying for these weapons and soldiers to terrorize the people we were with. It was a terrible sin the way we saw it, and as Christians we felt we had no choice but to speak out. The way their troops treated the Christians in *Comunidades* there was shameful. The worst part was, we knew it would be worse had we not been there. Something had to be done.²¹⁷

The membership of Witness for Peace reached at least 80,000 Americans at its peak in the 1980s.²¹⁸ It is impossible to know the full scope of Witness for Peace’s

²¹⁵ Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 110-111.

²¹⁶ David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 237.

²¹⁷ Yvonne Dilling, Interview.

²¹⁸ <https://www.solidaritycollective.org/>.

impact domestically and in Central America. What is known, at the very least, is that the movement's message definitely reached the White House and made the Reagan administration and the Pentagon consider critically every move they made in the region. U.S. aid continued to flow to the region for the duration of the decade, and tens of thousands of people died in the conflicts as a result. Still, the impact of Witness for Peace should not be understated. Scholars argue that the groundswell of support in the pews of American churches halted U.S. plans for an escalation in, and even a possible invasion of, Nicaragua.²¹⁹ The fear of losing the support of Christians at a time when the GOP was finally able to rely on them as a solid voting bloc proved to be a useful tool of Witness for Peace in their campaign to decrease the role of the U.S. in Central America.

Together, the TEC leadership of Sanctuary, Casa Romero, and Witness for Peace demonstrate the shared activism by a swath of American Christians during the late stage of the Cold War. Progressives within U.S. mainline denominations worked alongside Catholic and Jewish coreligionists and secular humanist allies to end the suffering of the poor and oppressed people in Central America. Using their scriptures and their own faith traditions of fighting against injustice, Sanctuary and Casa Romero's activists enjoyed their shared success in helping get refugees across the U.S.-Mexico and often the U.S.-Canada border. From there, refugees stayed safely beyond the grasp of INS and Border Patrol, neutralizing the threat of deportation. Witness for Peace members pushed back on U.S. interventionism at home through various forms of protest, while others traveled to Central America and protected the people with their own bodies as human shields. Viewed collectively, the Tucson Sanctuary movement, Casa Romero in Texas, and

²¹⁹ Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 238.

Witness for Peace provide evidence for the potent and widespread activism by progressive Christians during the 1980s. They were not the only people of faith who took radical steps in the late twentieth century, but they represent an organic movement reaching tens of thousands of people during a time when their congregations were experiencing decline on many other levels. Such a powerful movement was therefore destined to attract the attention of the government of the United States.

5. BACKLASH: SANCTUARY ON TRIAL

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”²²⁰

Romans 13: 1 – 7

“It is dangerous to be right in matters when the established authorities are wrong.”

Voltaire

Jack Elder and his family arrived at Casa Romero in San Benito, Texas in 1983. Together, they held tightly to a shared purpose within the mission of Sanctuary. His four children were all under nine years, too young to understand everything in their new environment. The parents, however, recognized that their actions could possibly bring heavy legal and financial consequences. For the next two years, thousands of refugees came through Casa Oscar Romero along with hundreds of volunteers and members of the media. Word of the unofficial “evasive actions” mission by Elder at Casa Romero became well known by the public, causing the U.S. government to eventually take legal action. From 1983 to 1985, Elder was indicted twice, tried twice in federal court, and found guilty on six felony counts. Thirty-five years later, Elder maintains his actions were the right thing to do. “Suffering,” he said, “does not seem the appropriate word to

²²⁰ Romans 13: 1-6, *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 261-262.

describe the effect these legal consequences had on me or my family...we were gifted during this time.”²²¹

Suffering for a righteous cause has been a vital component of several religions for millennia. Christianity is not alone in its embrace of hardship and suffering for its dedicated adherents. However, the Christian faith is unique in that one of its foundational tenets is the acceptance and even joyous expectation of suffering for the sake of righteousness.²²² The momentum enjoyed by the Sanctuary Movement and its inspired outgrowths Casa Oscar Romero and Witness for Peace propelled progressive Christianity through much of the 1980s. Volunteers in these organizations worked to fulfill their spiritual duty through their service to and with the people of Central America by providing short term shelter to prevent refugees from being deported, and at times even going abroad to stop violent acts before they could occur.

With an increasing amount of publicity came serious problems for many of the people involved in these movements. By the mid-1980s, the government had arrested leaders and charged several with human smuggling and other crimes. Most of the leaders and volunteers involved in Sanctuary accepted the reality that there could be consequences for their activism in violation of U.S. laws. They also believed that God was on their side, although other Christians disagreed vehemently with them on this

²²¹ Jack Elder, Interview.

²²² For context on suffering and righteousness in Christianity, see Mark 8:35, 1 Peter 3:14, 2 Corinthians 4:17, 2 Timothy 3:12, Colossians 1:24, Hebrews 2:10. Historically, the Church in its first three hundred years was marginalized and frequently attacked by the Roman Empire for its refusal to show fealty to the emperor and imperialism. Many of the most venerated leaders in early Christianity were men and women who were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ. To lose one's life because of one's faith or righteousness was not shameful but rather a distinct honor for early Christians, since the founder of the religion was himself a convicted criminal who died at the hands of the state. For more on this topic, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999).

point. Sanctuary proved to be a pivotal wedge issue within American Christianity starting in the 1980s, with fault lines still visible in the present.

The United States Government vs. the Sanctuary Movement

While Sanctuary workers held firm to their position of helping refugees and speaking out against their government's actions in Central America, the United States responded with determination of their own. The Reagan administration never wavered in its refusal to grant refugee status to the Salvadorans now in the United States, hiding in declared Sanctuary churches and homes. Stating that there was no law to defend the position of the Sanctuary Movement, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) commissioner Alan C. Nelson argued that the migrants and their helpers should "take the legal avenues available to them."²²³ Nelson and other government agency officials considered the movement to be well intentioned while accusing the Sanctuary Movement at the same time of duplicity. Behind all of their demonstrations and "Good Samaritan" talk, Nelson remarked pointedly that their primary goal was to make public their own opposition to "the president's policy in Central America."²²⁴ As Corbett, Fife, and others within the movement had admitted to this already, Nelson's critique was hardly newsworthy. It did, however, serve to discredit further the movement in the eyes of conservatives who defended Reagan and American foreign policy in the last decade of the Cold War.²²⁵

²²³ Tomsho, 93.

²²⁴ Tomsho, 94.

²²⁵ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 203-205.

With criticism levied at them from the government, even dedicated Sanctuary Movement ministers struggled with the legality issues surrounding their efforts. There was certainly historical precedent for the involvement of clergy in activities declared illegal by their own government. Ministers of many different denominations took leadership roles in social movements like the Underground Railroad of the nineteenth century and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Historical precedent was one thing, but honest ministers and laypeople still felt uneasy about their new role as activists.

Dick Haddon, a Methodist minister based in Los Angeles, wrestled with obedience to the commandments of his religion when they seemed in direct contradiction to the laws of his own country. Haddon eventually chose to become a conscientious objector and ignore the laws against helping the migrants in his community. “It’s the place where your religious mandate confronts you with Caesar’s law. You either cozy up to the law and numb your conscience, or you can’t live with yourself.”²²⁶ Haddon’s church provided sanctuary to many Salvadorans and other refugees in the Los Angeles area and was representative of the ecumenical spirit of the movement. Methodists like Haddon’s congregation harbored refugees along with Jewish synagogues and Catholic parishes.

Due to the public actions of ministers like Haddon and thousands of volunteers, the Sanctuary Movement garnered significant press coverage nationwide. With the increasing publicity, eventually the federal government did more than just condemn the work of ministers and laity within the movement. A swift backlash from the INS came in

²²⁶ Becklund, “Immigration Law,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1988.

the form of mass deportations throughout the decade. To make matters worse for the deported Salvadorans, the U.S. informed the government of El Salvador of the names on the passenger lists so that the junta's enforcers could respond with deadly efficiency. Additionally, INS proposed the building of larger detention centers and the enforcement of even more restrictive asylum laws in order to discourage those in Central America eyeing a possible escape to the United States.²²⁷

Fears of a prosecutorial intensification toward Central Americans and those aiding them in the Sanctuary Movement were realized fully by 1985. The United States government surreptitiously recorded Sanctuary workers helping refugees in Tucson, Arizona and used the evidence to bring federal charges against them. Sanctuary workers cried foul, seeing the recording and the court case that followed as a deliberate attempt by the government to silence the movement.²²⁸ The government's case involved two priests, three nuns, a minister, eight laypeople, and two other individuals. The group was charged with conspiracy and alien-smuggling, and fifty-eight undocumented Central Americans were also rounded up in the process. The trial lasted from November 1985 to May of 1986 and resulted in conviction of the religious Sanctuary workers, though they were given probation and not prison sentences.²²⁹ Naturally, the case rattled many of the volunteers, and the movement experienced both an increase in public attention for their cause and a period of confusion and distrust among their ranks. Fears of an informant among them remained problematic in the aftermath of the case.²³⁰

²²⁷ Ravashiere, "Salvador Refugees," *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1982.

²²⁸ Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 35.

²²⁹ Coutin, *Culture of Protest*, 37.

²³⁰ Coutin, 37.

Reverend Fife was among those charged in the Tucson investigation into the activities of Sanctuary. Having made public the work of Sanctuary on multiple occasions, it did not surprise the minister or any of his fellow workers. Still, facing federal charges and the threat of imprisonment and costly fines gave pause to all concerned. Fife was 46 years old with a wife and two sons at home. Worried about his family and the loved ones of his fellow defendants, Fife felt “powerless” as the courtroom drama unfolded in 1986.²³¹ The trial took a toll on the defendants, but they emerged from the experience emboldened rather than frightened. Support seemed to be pouring in from everywhere for the defendants and for Sanctuary as a cause.

Thousands of people, tens of thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of people heard we were in trouble and said, ‘We’ll help.’ I have piles of letters and communications from people all over the world who simply say, ‘We’ve been praying for you. We are with you.’ There aren’t words to express how that feels.²³²

Fife was sentenced to five years of probation. He vowed to continue the work of Sanctuary while the U.S. government vowed to continue its prosecution of these “well intended but misguided” people.²³³

During the same period, U.S. government officials arrested and brought charges against Jack Elder and Stacey Lynn Merkt, a coworker at Casa Romero. Elder and Merkt were separately followed by INS agents as they aided in the sheltering and transport of undocumented migrants from El Salvador.²³⁴ While helping the Salvadorans find refuge within the United States, Elder always maintained that his actions would not have been

²³¹ Interview with John Fife, *Sojourners* editorial, July 1986.

²³² Interview with Fife, *Sojourners*, July 1986.

²³³ “Six Convicted, Five Cleared of Plot to Smuggle in Aliens for Sanctuary,” Special to *The New York Times*, May 2, 1986.

²³⁴ Wayne King, “Two Go on Trial for Illegally Helping Aliens,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1985.

necessary if not for his government's "low intensity warfare" in Central America.²³⁵ Like Fife, Elder publicly stated that part of his work in the Sanctuary Movement was to draw attention to U.S. intervention in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. When Reagan administration officials criticized Elder and other Sanctuary workers' actions on behalf of Central American refugees, they painted their opposition as radicals who did not understand the reality on the ground in these places. Elder retorted in historical and biblical language, along the same lines as Corbett, that the precedent for his actions was the Underground Railroad. Just as those Christians saw their spiritual duty included breaking the law, in this case the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, so Elder used his religious belief to justify the breaking of his government's application of the Refugee Act of 1980.²³⁶

Despite their argument in court that they were justified in their actions, Elder and Merkt were both convicted. Facing fines of \$21,000 and up to 30 years of prison or probation on six felony counts of human smuggling, Elder continued to speak out on why Sanctuary efforts were necessary and why the U.S. government was the true criminal.²³⁷ In early 1985, a sympathetic judge sentenced Elder to two years of probation with the caveat that he was not to speak publicly on Sanctuary or do any work to assist refugees. After moving his family to San Antonio, Elder continued working to help the marginalized populations where he lived. As a former teacher, he was unable to find gainful employment in his preferred field of education due to the felony conviction.

²³⁵ Jack Elder, "The Sanctuary Challenge," *The Texas Observer*, June 27, 1986.

²³⁶ UPI Archives, "Sanctuary Leader Seeks Dismissal of Charges," September 5, 1984.

²³⁷ Darcy Sprague, "Old School Activism: The Story of Jack Elder," FOLO Media, July 28, 2017. <https://www.folomedia.org/old-school-activism-the-story-of-jack-elder/>.

Keenly aware of the high cost of his involvement in Sanctuary, Elder spent many of his remaining years working a series of odd jobs to provide for his family's needs.²³⁸

By 1986, a mysterious development added an entirely new dimension to the legal cases involving the Sanctuary Movement. Across eleven American cities, churches and legal groups working with Central American refugees became targets of burglaries and vandalism. Files were thrown around offices, drawers taken out and turned over, and sometimes equipment was broken. Most disturbing of all was the discovery of missing sanctuary-related files, tax records, and membership lists.²³⁹ Sanctuary leaders immediately suspected the INS, the FBI, or right-wing groups of the crimes. Government agencies deflected any blame and pointed to foreign agents from El Salvador and Guatemala as the culprits. Either way, Sanctuary workers felt threatened and harassed after the Tucson case and the series of office break-ins.²⁴⁰

In response to the uproar over the break-ins, the United States government held Congressional Subcommittee meetings in February of 1987. Subcommittee members proceeded to listen to hours of testimony by Sanctuary leaders from several prominent churches in the movement. Using the Refugee Act of 1980 as their foundation, leaders such as Reverend Donovan Cook of University Baptist Church in Seattle, Washington spoke passionately in explaining his religious community's involvement in the cause of sanctuary.²⁴¹ Using his own personal experience in traveling to El Salvador, Reverend

²³⁸ Sprague, "Old School Activism."

²³⁹ Laurie Becklund, "Burglars or Snoopers? Break-Ins in 11 Cities Are Aimed at Churches, Groups Involved in the Sanctuary Movement," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1986.

²⁴⁰ Becklund, "Burglars or Snoopers," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1986.

²⁴¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, 1987. Break-ins at Sanctuary Churches and Organizations Opposed to Administration Policy in Central America. 100th Congress, 1st session. 43.

Cook substantiated for the members of the subcommittee and the press that the situation in El Salvador was truly as terrible as reported by the Salvadorans when they crossed over the border seeking asylum. Cook noted, “Sanctuary is an act of compassion, it is an act of love, it is a lawful act required of us as citizens of this country under the Refugee Act of 1980, and is in accordance with international law.”²⁴²

Other leaders in the movement also testified to the reasons for their involvement in helping Salvadorans and Guatemalans, and they also spoke to the fear and anxiety they felt as a result of the break-ins and accompanying vandalism. In spite of agency denials, Sanctuary leader Garrett Brown of the New Institute of Central America voiced his doubts about the innocence of the FBI and INS. Brown recounted the history of these agencies as supporters of right-wing groups from the 1950s through the 1970s. Next, Brown aggressively accused the government in his testimony, stating that “the United States policy in Central America is tremendously unpopular with the people that know the most about it. If the government were able, through its intimidation campaign...(to) reduce our impact...this would obviously be a great boon for them.”²⁴³

When the Congressional Subcommittee hearings ended, the government still claimed to have no clear verdict on who was responsible for the rash of break-ins and vandalism that plagued Sanctuary churches across the country. One FBI informant who was tasked with infiltrating the movement to provide the authorities with evidence of illegal activity was Frank Varelli, a Salvadoran anti-communist crusader living in the United States during the 1980s. Varelli turned against the U.S. intelligence community during his years of service when he learned that his actual mission was to help the

²⁴² U.S. Congress, Break-ins at Sanctuary Churches, 43.

²⁴³ U.S. Congress, Break-ins at Sanctuary Churches, 60.

government “curtail civil liberties” and dampen public dissent against military intervention in Central America.²⁴⁴ After Varelli’s damning testimony in the hearings, Sanctuary leaders had their suspicions confirmed that it was the U.S. government orchestrating the break-ins as a form of intimidation.

The Conservative Evangelical Critique

Besides government agencies, America’s conservative Christians harbored their own suspicions of the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s. Evangelicals had supported Reagan in the 1980 election and showed no signs of turning away from the GOP as the decade wore on.²⁴⁵ Sanctuary churches earned the ire of Christians who did not share their interpretations of the scriptures, moral duty, or the Refugee Act of 1980. Prominent evangelical leaders such as Reverend Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority, and Pat Robertson, leader of the 700 Club and the Christian Broadcasting Network, viewed communism as an existential threat to Christianity and the United States.²⁴⁶ When Reagan spoke in militaristic terms about the global fight against Marxism and America’s role in it, evangelicals heard much that they liked.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Ross Gelbspan, *Break-Ins, Death Threats, and the FBI: The Covert War against the Central America Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 107.

²⁴⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 132-133. Scholars define the term “conservative evangelical” as a person who typically believes in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, that one must have a “Born Again” experience for salvation, and that it is a Christian’s duty to live a morally exemplary life while helping to spread the Gospel to the world.

²⁴⁶ Pat Robertson, “Action Plan for the 1980s,” in *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Matthew Avery Sutton (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 119-121.

²⁴⁷ American evangelical animosity toward Marxism has a long history, dating to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. Nativism toward new immigrants from Russia and southeastern Europe was common in American churches as many conservative Christians feared the cultural change accompanying the “new immigration.” After the eventual success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, American Christians grew anxious when they became aware of the persecution of the Russian Orthodox

The civil war in El Salvador began to intensify during the start of Reagan's first term and quickly became one of the administration's top Cold War priorities. Seeking to limit the expansion of Soviet-styled communism in the Western Hemisphere, Reagan's policy initiatives included supporting right-wing dictatorships and insurgencies throughout Central America.²⁴⁸ Reagan's uncompromising approach was clearly seen in U.S. posturing in El Salvador in the first year of the administration. Accusing the rebels of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) of forming an alliance with the Soviet Union and Cuba with the goal of spreading Marxism throughout the Americas, Reagan pursued an aggressive foreign policy.²⁴⁹ The cozy relationship between the GOP and the conservative evangelicals was aided by the Moral Majority's push into politics during the 1980s. If liberal mainline Christians saw their spiritual purpose as providing unconditional love and support to the poor and oppressed people of the world, the followers of Falwell and Robertson lined up in an entirely different direction.²⁵⁰ The position of the Christian Right was stridently nationalistic, squarely behind "Reagan the Cold Warrior" on many domestic and foreign policy initiatives.

While Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority worked on the domestic agenda, Pat Robertson assumed the lead in foreign policy advocacy in support of Reagan. The INS

Church under Soviet rule. For many of America's faithful, Marxism meant not just a violent upheaval of the social and economic order, but the end of their cherished religion as well. For more on this topic see Matthew Avery Sutton's *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), Robert Wuthnow's *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), and Kevin Kruse's *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

²⁴⁸ Joaquín M. Chávez, "How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?" *American Historical Review* (December 2015): 1787.

²⁴⁹ Brian D'Haeseleer, "'Drawing the Line' in El Salvador: Washington Confronts Insurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992," *Cold War History*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2018): 137.

²⁵⁰ Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1984), 413.

declared the Sanctuary Movement a threat to the security of the United States, so Robertson used his 700 Club international television platform to defend that assertion. Traveling to Honduras in 1982, Robertson broadcast episodes of the 700 Club to his global audience. There, the television minister told his supporters that the harsh realities of the Cold War prevented Christians from pleading neutrality in the internal conflicts of Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Robertson informed his audience that Marxism was on the march throughout the region, and it was up to the United States of America to stop it.

In 1983 Robertson continued his pro-Reagan, anti-communist crusade by meeting with Salvadoran junta troops and attempting to show their positive side. Ever the apologist, Robertson reminded his fellow Christians that both sides were committing atrocities in the civil war.²⁵¹ Moving on to Nicaragua in 1984 during the height of the *Contra* insurgency, Robertson's humanitarian relief group known as Operation Blessing International publicly proclaimed the *Contras* to be "God's Army" while donating up to \$7 million in aid.²⁵²

Reagan's Consolidation of Evangelical Support

The relationship between the GOP, Reagan, and conservative evangelicals grew stronger throughout the 1980s thanks in large part to Reagan's strong communication skills. Reagan knew how to speak the language of the Christian Right and did so often in

²⁵¹ David John Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 76-77.

²⁵² Philip Taubman, "Private Groups in U.S. Aiding Managua's Foes," *New York Times*, July 15, 1984. Additionally, David John Marley argues that Robertson's "humanitarian" aid to the Nicaraguan *Contras* could have freed up more money by the Central Intelligence Agency to purchase weapons since Robertson's group took care of the food, clothing, and medical needs ("Splintering," 864).

order to consolidate his power base. Speaking at a 1983 gathering of evangelicals, the president spoke on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from matters of religion in the public square to foreign policy. Arguing against a relaxation in brinkmanship with the “Evil Empire” of the Soviet Union, Reagan claimed that it was no time to back down and become dovish when so much was at stake. Nurturing the evangelical concerns about Marxism abroad and domestically, Reagan told them it was their Christian duty to support a strong military and interventionist policies. Christians in attendance were urged to “speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority.”²⁵³ Progressives within the Sanctuary Movement and Witness for Peace knew the jab was intended for them.

In the context of the controversies surrounding the Sanctuary Movement and liberal Christians marching for peace, Reagan’s comments were intended to keep those in the Moral Majority on his side while also discrediting Christians opposed to his policies. In his closing remarks, the president encouraged a continuation of the strong relationship between their churches and his state, “We have it within our power to begin the world over again. We can do it, doing together what no one church could do by itself.”²⁵⁴ Utilizing the language of power with a decidedly sacred purpose appealed to conservative evangelicals, who had long hoped for a leader who saw things their way and used biblical language to communicate with them. This connection between the GOP and the

²⁵³ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals,” March 8, 1983, in *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Matthew Avery Sutton (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press), 131-136.

²⁵⁴ Reagan, “Remarks,” 136.

conservative evangelicals allowed Reagan to count on the support of this particular branch of Protestant Christianity throughout his two terms in office.²⁵⁵

As a result of Reagan's overtures to conservative evangelicals, their leaders continued to speak out in favor of Reagan's Central America policy around the world. They also grew more vocal in opposing the Sanctuary Movement at home. By the mid-1980s, conservative Christians began to criticize the movement for what they saw as hypocrisy disguised as humanitarianism. Evangelicals stated that they could understand why such Christians would feel the need to support the oppressed and brutalized victims of Central American wars. However, where the division took on a more serious tone was in the politicization surrounding which refugees deserved American aid and asylum.

Christians on the right decried with the utmost vigor the "litmus test" that the Sanctuary Movement employed.²⁵⁶ If the movement was truly centered on helping victims of violence coming out of war-torn Central America, why weren't Nicaraguans escaping a leftist regime given the same humanitarian treatment as Salvadorans who fled a right-wing government? Conservatives answered their own question, noting that the Sanctuary Movement was much more focused on shaming American military intervention in El Salvador than it was in helping refugees.²⁵⁷ Critics charged that the movement stated in its early days that it acted in defiance of U.S. support of right-wing governments in Central America. Thus, in the eyes of many conservative Christians humanitarian sanctuary was relegated cynically to second tier status behind the primary

²⁵⁵ David John Marley, "Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Religious Right," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 48, No. 4 (Fall 2006), 851-868.

²⁵⁶ Tomsho, 94.

²⁵⁷ Martin Mawyer, "Sanctuary Movement: The Hidden Agenda in Smuggling Aliens" *Christianity Today*, October 1986, 62.

goal of changing U.S. foreign policy.²⁵⁸ The Sanctuary Movement, said their opponents, ought to at least own up to their dishonest tactics of putting personal politics in front of their Christian mission.

Opponents of Sanctuary also took umbrage with Sanctuary workers' tactics in helping to smuggle Central Americans across the border to safety in the United States. Compassion in helping those already in America was one matter, but this radical step upset the “delicate balance between law and compassion” from a conservative evangelical point of view.²⁵⁹ Respect for the law was a traditional rallying point for Christians in the debate over immigration, refugees, and the Sanctuary Movement. Different denominations within American Protestantism held divergent viewpoints on this issue. Evangelicals differed from their mainline counterparts with respect to their views on sin and accountability. Liberal Protestants in the Sanctuary Movement viewed the breaking of unjust laws as understandable and thus forgivable. Essentially, it was the unjust, corrupt system of immigration and bad foreign policy deserving blame.

The individual immigrant could not be faulted for breaking such immoral laws, and Sanctuary workers thought themselves exempt from judgment and punishment as well. Quite typical of their theological views, conservative Christians held to a strongly individualized view of sin. In their understanding, people were inherently sinful, so systems and laws were not the real issue. Rather, such believers held firm to scriptural passages such as Romans 13:1-7 which commanded obedience to the governing authorities as a form of submission to God. In this way, both the Salvadoran refugees and

²⁵⁸ Mawyer, “Sanctuary Movement,” 63.

²⁵⁹ William G. Hollingsworth, “Controlling Illegal Immigration,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 102 (July 1985): 648-650.

their helpers in the Sanctuary Movement were guilty before God and the laws of the United States.²⁶⁰

Theologies of Liberation in the Crosshairs

Many Sanctuary workers' embrace of liberation theology added to the growing frustration from conservatives within both Protestant and Catholic ranks. Frequently, outspoken critics worried that liberation theology blurred the lines between Marxism and the long tradition of Christian compassion for the poor. Evangelicals lumped many of the clergy and laity within the ranks of liberation theology into the camp of Marxist sympathizers or outright communists. Naturally then, harsh judgment from the right came often and with vitriol.²⁶¹ For conservatives, liberation theology and its criticism of capitalism, social class distinctions, and militarism had simply gone too far. This leftward lurch by Latin American clergy did not go unnoticed by the Vatican, and liberation theology began to receive criticism for emphasizing earthly concerns over spiritual priorities like salvation.²⁶²

In the United States during the height of the Cold War, critics of liberation theology within Christian circles were everywhere. Protestant commentators who normally did not discuss Catholic issues spoke out on many occasions against the perceived threat from this aberrant form of the faith.²⁶³ Like the Vatican, conservative

²⁶⁰ Mark R. Amstutz, *Just Immigration: American Policy in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 109.

²⁶¹ Denys Turner, "Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 200.

²⁶² Richard John Neuhaus, "A Question of Simple Honesty," *National Review*, May 23, 1986, 37.

²⁶³ Neuhaus, "A Question," 37.

evangelical critics found fault in the proximity of liberation theology teachings with the revolutionary leanings of Marxism. Theologically conservative Protestants warned their Catholic brethren about it and only grew more alarmed when it showed up in their own houses of worship through the Sanctuary Movement.

Conservative evangelicals associated liberation theology with communism, even though liberation theologians rarely went that far in their own words. Specifics on complex theological and political matters were of little consequence in the Cold War. The standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States continued to polarize American conservatives and liberals, so by the 1980s any hope of nuanced understanding of one another's positions was increasingly difficult. Conservative evangelicals tended to support strong national defense and traditional values and viewed the Soviet Union and other Communist nations as a grave threat.²⁶⁴ When ministers or movements attempted to bring up social issues in conservative evangelical bodies, the response was typically a rebuke from the congregation and the denominational leadership. Preachers in conservative denominations that pushed too much on progressive social issues of the day, such as racism or women's rights, faced criticism for putting earthly concerns ahead of spiritual needs. Jerry Falwell, concerned about the increasing number of ministers involving themselves in the various social issues of the day, reminded them that "they were not called to be politicians but to be soul winners."²⁶⁵

Critics found the liberation theology's emphasis on doing good works instead of saving souls far too reminiscent of the Social Gospel, a movement dating to the late

²⁶⁴ Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 195.

²⁶⁵ Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 336.

nineteenth century which many conservative Christians found to be heretical. The Progressive Era and the Social Gospel were forever connected in the evangelical mind, with frustrated memories of the growth of government and the eclipse of proselytization as the primary focus of American churches. Evangelicals maintained that the priority of every church was the preaching of the gospel message of salvation for sinners. Since many of them held an apocalyptic worldview, time was short for making converts before the end of the world.²⁶⁶ Any departure from the most important task of the church, such as peace marches, civil rights demonstrations, or feeding the hungry, was viewed with suspicion. Those actions could be acceptable if done in the right spirit and the proper context, but the first goal was always to be the salvation of souls. Harold Ockenga, a prominent evangelical pastor, once warned other Christians of the danger of mixing faith with social activism, stating it “will lead to the welfare state, to creeping socialism and ultimately to communism.”²⁶⁷

The criticism from the right during the 1980s about Sanctuary was one component of a larger sectarian conflict. The Cold War exacerbated feelings of anxiety and confusion in both mainline progressive denominations and their conservative evangelical counterparts. Conservatives tended to view communism as an existential threat to the United States and to their religion as well. Among Christians, one aspect of Soviet rule they were most familiar with was the persecution of the Orthodox Church in Russia and its satellites. They might not have been able to cite from *Das Kapital* or *The Communist*

²⁶⁶ Dowland, *Family Values*, 195.

²⁶⁷ Harold John Ockenga, “The ‘New’ Evangelicalism,” in *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Matthew Avery Sutton (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 33.

Manifesto, but they knew to be insulted by the Marxist axiom stating that religion was “the sigh of the oppressed creature...and the opium of the people.”²⁶⁸

Many American Christians believed that Marxism represented a grave challenge to their own faith and to the United States as a nation. For centuries, faithful Americans claimed to be the modern incarnation of the “City Upon a Hill” made famous in the sermon by Puritan minister Jonathan Winthrop in 1630.²⁶⁹ The external threat from the Soviet Union’s possible expansion into the Western Hemisphere thus had to be met with extreme measures. When their coreligionists involved themselves in a mission to “illegally” aid in the transport and shelter of refugees from Central America while also condemning the U.S. military role there, it opened yet another front in the ever-expanding culture wars.

The theological and cultural divide between liberal and conservative Christians widened to a chasm at the close of the 1980s. Currently, mainline denominations continue along their progressive path while evangelicals remain conservative socially and theologically. Mainline denominations have smaller congregations but have continued their dedication to causes like racial and economic justice, immigration reform, and reproductive rights.²⁷⁰ Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians remain committed to alleviating suffering and promoting social change at home and abroad when applicable. Conservative evangelicals, in contrast, endure in the modern era with

²⁶⁸ Andrew M. McKinnon, “Reading ‘Opium of the People:’ Expression, Protest, and the Dialectics of Religion,” *Critical Sociology*, 2005 31 (1/2), 16.

²⁶⁹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America’s Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁷⁰ Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 256-263.

congregational growth and considerable cultural and political clout.²⁷¹ Their primary goals center around evangelism and discipleship, with social justice typically relegated to secondary importance in the majority of modern congregations.

The legal backlash to the Sanctuary Movement demonstrates that the cause was truly effective in fulfilling its mission in the United States. Sanctuary's provision of aid to tens of thousands of refugees against their own government's restrictions brought a bright spotlight on the movement. In spite of legal and financial troubles, Sanctuary workers like John Fife and Jack Elder remain committed to the ideals they fought for in the 1980s and regret none of their actions.

The religious backlash resulting from Sanctuary is complicated in hindsight. On the one hand, progressive Christians won thousands of moral victories as they helped refugees avoid deportation back to certain death in Central America. Yet, conservative evangelicals appear to be winning the long-term battle over the religious soul of the United States at present. As they doubled down on popular concepts of patriotism, family values, law and order, and unwavering support for capitalism and limited government, their congregations continue to remain strong across the nation. Progressives, in contrast, worry about declining membership and tithes. As the traditional battles of the culture wars rage on, the American religious divide shows no signs of closing. The old battles over expressions of sexuality and reproductive autonomy are still present, but the renewed controversy over immigration will likely remain a significant wedge issue in America's pews for years to come.

²⁷¹ Jason Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 75.

6. CONCLUSION

The war in El Salvador continued for the remainder of the 1980s, leaving at least 70,000 people dead and millions displaced.²⁷² The chaos and violence of the period forced tens of thousands of Salvadorans to leave family and their livelihoods behind to journey to safety in the United States and Canada. Others escaped to Costa Rica or Honduras and lived as refugees in camps for as long as possible. Thousands who fled to the United States were fortunate to encounter the Sanctuary Movement and thus had a slight chance at asylum or avoidance of deportation back to the deadly war zone. The Salvadoran diaspora contributed to the increasing diversity of the United States after 1965. By 1990 the population of Salvadorans living in the United States had grown to 565, 081, up from 95,800 in 1980.²⁷³

The Chapultepec Peace Accords brought closure to the war in 1992 but Salvadoran migration to the U.S. continues in the twenty-first century. With an economy in ruins, a devastated infrastructure, and problems that predated the war still in place and exacerbated, the United States remains the preferred destination for Salvadorans able to emigrate. Those fortunate enough to make it over the American border face difficulty with byzantine immigration laws and procedural hurdles to receive asylum. For this reason, at least 60% of Salvadoran immigrants remain undocumented and in fear of deportation today.²⁷⁴

²⁷² T. David Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador: A Retrospective Analysis," *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1999):179.

²⁷³ Cecelia Menjivar, "El Salvador," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 413.

²⁷⁴ Menjivar, "El Salvador," 415.

The United States played a major role in the disunity and devastation experienced by the people of El Salvador during the late stages of the Cold War. For many American Christians within the Sanctuary Movement, their religious beliefs compelled them to engage in efforts to alleviate the suffering of Salvadorans. Whether they were transporting refugees to a new city or protesting the U.S. government's actions in Central America, such Christians believed themselves to be doing their part to fulfill their part in the Kingdom of God. It was irrelevant to many of the Christians involved that much of their religiously based activism was illegal in the eyes of their government. The Sanctuary Movement, Casa Oscar Romero, and Witness for Peace demonstrate the significant role that progressive Christianity played in American religious culture during the late twentieth century. Their emphasis on placing the needs of others before their own was as natural an expression of their Christian faith as prayer or Bible study would be for other Christians in traditionally conservative congregations.

Theologies of liberation and the *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* gained new and dedicated adherents in the decades preceding the Sanctuary Movement. Missionaries and aid workers from the United States who became involved in the causes of Sanctuary, Casa Romero, and Witness for Peace shared exposure to the teachings of these movements. Upon their return to the U.S., they were emboldened with new perspectives on suffering, social justice, and their own role in fostering the Kingdom of God for marginalized populations in Central America. These radical new theological paradigms became transnational and contributed to the progressivism found in mainline denominations by the 1980s. Christians from Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, and

Episcopalian backgrounds now viewed refugees and American interventionism as intersectional problems worthy of their attention.

Many of the Christians who served in the Sanctuary Movement, Casa Romero, and Witness for Peace remain involved with similar missions. Reverend John Fife, now in his 80s, still resides in Arizona and works with a faith-based group called No More Deaths (*No Más Muertes*). The purpose of No More Deaths is strikingly similar to the earlier Sanctuary Movement, with volunteers who assist migrating Central Americans, Mexicans, and others. The dangerous border crossing in the Sonoran Desert is still the chosen path into the United States for many undocumented migrants, so volunteers attempt to find people before the elements take a deadly toll. From providing food and water to lobbying for humane immigration reform in the United States, Fife continues to advocate on behalf of vulnerable people migrating into U.S. territory.²⁷⁵

Rob Mueller was involved in Sanctuary and the Christian anti-war protest movement in the 1980s. Like Fife, Mueller continues to work alongside and for marginalized groups at his church in San Antonio, Texas. As the pastor of Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Mueller continues to utilize the *Comunidades* model for ministry among his predominantly Latinx congregation. Many of them are new arrivals to the United States from Latin America, connecting Mueller's work in the present to connect with his past. The ideology of the Kingdom of God expressed through service to and alongside the poor remains of paramount importance to him.²⁷⁶

Yvonne Dilling is another veteran of the movement who remains dedicated to the cause that she and others fought for with such dedication in the 1980s. Dilling currently

²⁷⁵ Fife, Interview. See also <https://nomoredeaths.org/about-no-more-deaths/>.

²⁷⁶ Mueller, Interview.

works for a branch of the Maryknoll organization in San Antonio, the Discover Your Neighbor mission. She remains steadfast in her desire to serve historically marginalized populations based upon her religious dedication. Discover Your Neighbor makes use of the experience of the Maryknollers in Central America and emphasizes social and economic justice as core teachings of Christianity.²⁷⁷

Together, Sanctuary, Casa Romero, and Witness for Peace demonstrate the diversity of religious devotion in the United States during a decade recognized for conformity and homogeneity. These movements grew in scope and size thanks in large measure to the transnational theologies that many American leaders and workers encountered while in Central America. Once imported into churches in the United States, theologies of liberation and the *Comunidades* model took American mainline denominations in new spiritual directions while also encouraging activism on a scale not seen since the antebellum period.

The intersection of immigration, foreign policy, and religion during the 1980s demonstrates the continuity of the “culture war” with roots dating to the 1920s. With their responses to the Scopes Trial, immigration, new gender norms, and other controversies, conservative and progressive Christians broke fellowship throughout the twentieth century. This division further intensified in the 1960s over contentious issues like the Vietnam War, civil rights, the Sexual Revolution, and disputes over the church-state relationship. The disunity following decades of fragmentation on social issues accelerated, and by the 1980s the stage was set for the dispute over refugees, immigration, and Cold War strategy.

²⁷⁷ <https://discoveryourneighbor.org/how-to-use-discover-your-neighbor/>.

The Sanctuary Movement was controversial on several fronts. First, it embraced elements of liberation theology which many conservative Christians felt was more aligned with Marxism than with biblical Christianity. Additionally, Sanctuary workers brazenly broke U.S. laws by aiding undocumented Central Americans. When Sanctuary combined efforts with Witness for Peace, evangelicals who sided with Reagan's Cold War initiatives reached their breaking point with their progressive brothers and sisters. As conservative evangelicalism aligned itself increasingly with U.S. economic and nationalist interests, progressives within the Sanctuary Movement began to look like followers of a different religion altogether.

Decades after the wars in Central America, conservatives and progressive Christians remain at odds over immigration. Today, a primary front in the culture wars is evident in the battle over Sanctuary cities. Harkening back to the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, today's Sanctuary cities work to help undocumented immigrants avoid deportation in most cases. With over 150 cities and municipalities that have some measure of security for undocumented immigrants, there is no officially organized "Sanctuary City" movement today. Different locales use different methods and levels of cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).²⁷⁸ The methodology and motivation present today in Sanctuary cities demonstrate their roots in the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. Cities who have declared themselves as Sanctuaries are often in

²⁷⁸ Kristina Cooke and Ted Hesson, "What Are 'Sanctuary' Cities and Why Is Trump Targeting Them?" *Reuters*, February 25, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-crime/what-are-sanctuary-cities-and-why-is-trump-targeting-them-idUSKBN20J25R>.

progressive cities and states, and they frequently cite the deadly situation in many Latin American nations as the reason such immigrants deserve refuge in the United States.²⁷⁹

The theological and legal controversies surrounding Sanctuary and its outgrowths in the 1980s exposed a widening divide between liberal and conservative Christians, evidenced by the debate over Sanctuary Cities today. Since the 1980s, Republicans have courted and counted on the evangelical vote to win national and local elections. However, it is worth noting that immigration was not always a major concern for the GOP or evangelicals when the bond first formed. Between 1990 and the present, immigration became one of the most important issues to conservative evangelicals, seen in the strong support for restrictionist policies under Trump. From the Muslim ban to the border wall and the family separation policy, conservative Christians have largely coalesced with the Republican Party on the issue of immigration to the United States.²⁸⁰ Their counterparts across the church aisle, progressive or liberal Christians, voted for Democrats in large numbers during the same period. On the topic of immigration and Sanctuary, progressive Christians support liberalized immigration policies, particularly with cases of asylum.²⁸¹

With a polarized electorate and politicians weaponizing “culture war” issues to garner support every few years, the United States continues to wrestle with its immigration and refugee policies. The nation that prided itself on being “a nation of immigrants” following World War II has yet to find its footing on this issue. Within America’s churches, immigration continues to represent one of the most divisive

²⁷⁹ A. Naomi Paik, *Bans, Walls, Raids, Sanctuary: Understanding U.S. Immigration Policy for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 106-112.

²⁸⁰ Robin Dale Jacobson, *Faith and Race in American Political Life*, eds. Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 14.

²⁸¹ David L. Danner, “Immigration and the Episcopal Church: An Ever-Changing Face,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 95 No. 4, (Fall 2013), 649-671. See also Karen González, *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong* (Hagerstown, MD: Herald Press, 2019).

“wedge” issues, pitting conservative evangelicals against their more liberal mainline counterparts. The United States remains the most religiously devoted nation relative to other developed, industrialized nations in the West. Other than its traditional religiosity, the United States also fostered a xenophobic culture over the centuries. It is not surprising then, that religion and immigration have collided in the past and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abalos, David. "The Medellín Conference." *Cross Currents* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 113.
<https://eds-b-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=62682939-bb43-4278-bd14-bb62e90f8a96%40sessionmgr103>.
- Ahern, Kevin. "The Justice Legacy of Populorum Progressio: A Jesuit Case Study." *Journal of Moral Theology*, 6 No. 1 (January 2017): 39-56.
- Allitt, Patrick. *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Amstutz, Mark R. *Just Immigration: American Policy in Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017.
- Arnson, Cynthia. *El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies Transnational Institute, 1982.
- Becklund, Laurie. "Burglars or Snoopers? Break-Ins in 11 Cities Are Aimed at Churches, Groups Involved in the Sanctuary Movement." *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1986. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-01-30-me-2182-story.html>.
- Becklund, Laurie. "Immigration Law: Dilemma Deepens for Churches." *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1988. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-10-15-me-3449-story.html>.
- Berryman, Philip. "Latin American Liberation Theology." In *The Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, edited by Miguel De La Torre. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.
- Bird, David. "Minister Describes Origin of Work with Aliens." *New York Times*, May 3, 1986. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/03/us/minister-describes-origin-of-work-with-aliens.html>.
- Blum, Edward J., and Harvey, Paul, editors. *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Boff, Leonardo. *Ecclesigenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977.
- Brands, Hal. *Latin America's Cold War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

- Brett, Edward T. "The Impact of Religion in Central America: A Bibliographical Essay." *The Americas*, Vol. 49, No. 3 January 1993): 297-344. <https://www-cambridge-org.libproxy.txstate.edu/core/journals/americas/article/abs/impact-of-religion-in-central-america-a-bibliographical-essay/937A7C434B317F60C4A53B4782CA88BB>.
- Brockman, James R. *The Word Remains: The Life of Oscar Romero*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982.
- Cameron, Darla. "How Sanctuary Cities Work, and How Trump's Blocked Executive Order Could Have Affected Them." *Washington Post*, January 18, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/sanctuary-cities/>.
- Chavez, Joaquín M. "How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?" *American Historical Review*, December 2015: 1784-1797.
- Chavez, Leo R. *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Ching, Erik. *Stories of the Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Colonesse, Louis Michael. "Medellín Document on Joint Pastoral Planning." In *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, edited by Louis Michael Colonesse. Presented at the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1968-1969.
- Cook, Guillermo. *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Basic Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985.
- Cooke, Kristina and Hesson, Ted. "What Are 'Sanctuary' Cities and Why Is Trump Targeting Them?" Reuters, February 25, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-crime/what-are-sanctuary-cities-and-why-is-trump-targeting-them-idUSKBN20J25R>.
- Coutin, Susan Bibler. *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993.
- Crandall, Russell. *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977-1992*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Crittendon, Ann. *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and Law in Collision*. New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988.

- Cunningham, Hilary. *God and Caesar at the Rio Grande: Sanctuary and the Politics of Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Dale, Mariana. "Church Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s Revived in Tucson." *The Republic*, August 24, 2014.
<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2014/08/22/church-sanctuary-movement-s-revived-tucson/14471415/>.
- Danner, David L. "Immigration and the Episcopal Church: An Ever-Changing Face." *Anglican Theological Review*, 95 No. 4 (Fall 2013): 649-671.
http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/danner_95.4.pdf.
- Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Davidson, Miriam. *Convictions of the Heart: Jim Corbett and the Sanctuary Movement*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988.
- D'Haeseleer, Brian. "'Drawing the Line' in El Salvador: Washington Confronts Insurgency in El Salvador, 1979-1992." *Cold War History*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2018): 131-148. <https://eds-b-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=10&sid=d7428b42-ec5e-4358-9424-8331152e12fe%40sessionmgr102>.
- Dilling, Yvonne, and Ingrid Rogers. *In Search of Refuge*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1984.
- Dowland, Seth. *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.
- Dueck, A.J. *The Mennonite Brethren Church around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2010.
- Dunkerley, James. *The Long War: Dictatorship and Revolution in El Salvador*. London: Junction Books, 1982.
- Eagleson, John, and Torres, Sergio, editors. *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities: Papers from the International Ecumenical Congress of Theology, February 20 – March 2, 1980, São Paulo, Brazil*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

- Eisenbrandt, Matt. *Assassination of a Saint: The Plot to Murder Oscar Romero and the Quest to Bring His Killers to Justice*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
- Elder, Jack. "The Sanctuary Challenge." *The Texas Observer*, June 27, 1986.
- Ferris, Elizabeth G. *The Central American Refugees*. New York: Praeger Press, 1987.
- Fogel, Robert William. *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Evangelicalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- García, María Cristina. *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Gelbspan, Ross. *Break-Ins, Death Threats, and the FBI: The Covert War against the Central America Movement*. Boston: South End Press, 1991.
- Golden, Renny. "Sanctuary: Churches Take Part in a New Underground Railroad." *Sojourners*, December 24, 1982: 24-26.
- Grande, Rutilio. Sermon, February 13, 1977.
<https://walktheway.wordpress.com/tag/rutilio-grande/>.
- Grandin, Greg, and Joseph, Gilbert M., editors. *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Long Cold War*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Guntzel, Jeff Severns. "Maryknoll marks 25 years since martyrs' deaths." *National Catholic Reporter*, December 16, 2005. <https://eds-b-ebsohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=11&sid=9e5da6f7-bdb7-4451-8caa-c1837f4426ca%40sessionmgr102>.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People, Second Edition*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973.
- Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860 – 1925*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955.
- Hoeffel, Paul Heath. "The Eclipse of the Oligarchs." *New York Times*, September 6, 1981. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/121627140/9B4788C4D3704A40PQ/1?accountid=5683>.

- Hollingsworth, William G. "Controlling Illegal Immigration." *The Christian Century*, Vol. 102 (July 1985): 648-650.
- Hollyday, Joyce. "Leaven of the People." *Sojourners*, December 1980.
<https://sojo.net/magazine/december-1980/leaven-people>.
- Hopkin, C. Edward. "Basic Principles of Systematic Theology." *Anglican Theological Review*, 43 No. 1 (January 1961): 17-31. <https://eds-b-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=13&sid=9e5da6f7-bdb7-4451-8caa-c1837f4426ca%40sessionmgr102>.
- Hyer, Marjorie. "U.S. Policy on Central America Opposed by Mainline Christians." *Washington Post*, July 3, 1983.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/07/03/us-policy-on-central-america-opposed-by-mainline-christians/a13ac01d-a3f5-4f11-ad3f-9e4a1360822f/>.
- Iosso, Christian. "Study Team Looks at Causes Contributing to Border Crisis." *Presbyterian News Service*. May 6, 2019.
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/study-team-looks-at-causes-contributing-to-border-crisis/>.
- Izzo, Amanda L. *Liberal Christianity and Women's Global Activism: The YWCA of the USA and the Maryknoll Sisters*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Jackson, Robert H. *Race, Class, and Status: Indians in Spanish Colonial America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999.
- Jacobson, Robin Dale. *Faith and Race in American Political Life*, edited by Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012.
- Keeley, Theresa. *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.
- Kelly, Thomas M. "A Priest with His People: The Grounded Gospel of Rutilio Grande." *America*, June 6-13, 2016: 20-22.
- King, Wayne. "Two Go on Trial for Illegally Helping Aliens." *New York Times*, February 19, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/19/us/two-go-on-trial-in-houston-for-illegally-helping-aliens.html>.
- Koll, Karla Ann. "Presbyterians, the United States, and Central America: Background of the 1980s Debate." *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-), Spring 2000, Vol. 78, No. 1: 87-102.

- Kraut, Alan M. "A Century of Scholarship in American Immigration and Ethnic History." In *A Century of American Historiography*, edited by James M. Banner, Jr., 124-140. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2010.
- Lantzer, Jason. *Mainline Christianity: Past and Present of America's Majority Faith*. New York: NYU Press, 2012.
- Legge, Marilyn J. "The Church in Solidarity: Liberation Ecclesiology." In *Liberation Theology: An Introduction*, edited by Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, Mary H. Snyder. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.
- Lynch, John. *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- MacEoin, Gary, editor. *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugees' Struggle*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985.
- MacPherson, Myra. "Caught in the Storm of Sanctuary." *Washington Post*, March 12, 1985. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1985/03/12/caught-in-the-storm-of-sanctuary/ba04c62b-84fa-4c23-937a-582edda5695d/>.
- Marley, David John. *Pat Robertson: An American Life*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Marley, David John. "Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Religious Right." *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Fall 2006): 851-868.
- Marty, Martin E. *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1984.
- Mason, T. David. "The Civil War in El Salvador: A Retrospective Analysis." *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999): 297-341. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1007029>.
- Mawyer, Martin. "Sanctuary Movement: The Hidden Agenda in Smuggling Aliens." *Christianity Today*, October 1986.
- McKinnon, Andrew M. "Reading 'Opium of the People:' Expression, Protest, and the Dialectics of Religion." *Critical Sociology*, 2005, 31 (1/2): 15-38. <https://eds-b-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=24&sid=d7428b42-ec5e-4358-9424-8331152e12fe%40sessionmgr102>.

- Menjívar, Cecelia. "El Salvador." In *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, edited by Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda, 412-420. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Mesters, Carlos. "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People." In *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).
- Montgomery, Tommie Sue. "The Church in the Salvadoran Revolution." *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 1983): 62-87.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2633364>.
- Murphy, Carlyle. "Four Aliens Survive Tragic Trip to U.S." *Washington Post*, October 8, 1982. <https://search-proquest.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/147385977/EAD7161A79884C45PQ/1?accountid=5683>.
- Murphy, Carlyle. "Casa Romero: A Safe Port on the Texas Border." *Washington Post*, September 4, 1984.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/09/04/casa-romero-a-safe-port-on-the-texas-border/91053d90-aa03-4f5f-8ccc-ff1f4340c3c4/>.
- Murphy, Kim. "Refugees Testify on Horrors Suffered in El Salvador War." *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 1987. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/docview/898780020/74E3E5F353684B1FPQ/1?accountid=5683>.
- Negroponte, Diana Villiers. *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. "A Question of Simple Honesty." *National Review*, May 23, 1986. <https://eds-b-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=14&sid=d7428b42-ec5e-4358-9424-8331152e12fe%40sessionmgr102>.
- Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Noll, Mark. "Theology." In *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, edited by Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, 105-122. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Ockenga, Harold John. "The 'New' Evangelicalism." In *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Matthew Avery Sutton, 31-34. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2013.

- Osling, Richard N. "Those Beleaguered Maryknollers." *Time*, July 6, 1981. <https://eds-b-ebshost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=9&sid=9e5da6f7-bdb7-4451-8caa-c1837f4426ca%40sessionmgr102&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=54220861&db=f6h>.
- Paik, A. Naomi. *Bans, Walls, Raids, Sanctuary: Understanding U.S. Immigration Policy for the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020.
- Peterson, Anna L. *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's Civil War*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- Pope Paul VI, "Closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: Address of Pope Paul VI to the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering," December 8, 1965 https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-poveri.html.
- Rabe, Stephen G. *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Ravashiere, Christina. "Salvador Refugees: Shipped Back from U.S. Back into Civil War at 'Home.'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1982. <https://www.csmonitor.com/1982/0205/020560.html>.
- Reagan, Ronald. "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals." March 8, 1983. In *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Matthew Avery Sutton, 131-136.
- Roberts, Adam. "Refugees and Military Intervention." In *Refugees and International Relations*, edited by Gil Loescher and Laila Monahan. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Robertson, Pat. "Action Plan for the 1980s." In *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, edited by Matthew Avery Sutton, 119-121. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2012.
- Rogers, Daniel T. *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon*. Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Romero, Oscar. *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.
- Sedeno, David. "Casa Romero Provides Shelter to Thousands Fleeing Central America." *Associated Press*, March 17, 1986. <https://apnews.com/article/884f81c0b49ee9d628f2aff5e3ddff44>.

- Segundo, Juan Luis. *Faith and Ideologies*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984.
- Senia, Al. "13 Salvadorans Found Dead in Salvadoran Desert." *Washington Post*, July 7, 1980. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/07/13-smuggled-salvadorans-found-dead-in-us-desert/06e736ff-07bd-4cc2-8695-374f839278ea/>.
- Shenk, Phil M. "An Ecumenical Outpouring: Unified Church Opposition to U.S. El Salvador Policy." *Sojourners*, June 1981.
- Sider, Ron. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. New York: Paulist Press/Intervarsity Press, 1977.
- Smith, Christian. *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Sprague, Darcy. "Old School Activism: The Story of Jack Elder." *Folo Media*, July 28, 2017. <https://www.folomedia.org/old-school-activism-the-story-of-jack-elder/>.
- Stephens, Randall J. and Giberson, Karl W. *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Sutton, Matthew Avery. *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Swartz, David R. *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Taubman, Philip. "Private Groups in U.S. Aiding Managua's Foes." *New York Times*, July 15, 1984. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/15/world/private-groups-in-us-aiding-managua-s-foes.html>.
- Tomsho, Robert. *The American Sanctuary Movement*. Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987.
- Trost, Frederick R. "Sanctuary." *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 79. <https://eds-b-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=62682939-bb43-4278-bd14-bb62e90f8a96%40sessionmgr103>.
- Turner, Denys. "Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation." In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland, 199-217. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

- UPI Archives. "Sanctuary Leader Seeks Dismissal of Charges." September 5, 1984.
<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/09/05/Sanctuary-leader-seeks-dismissal-of-charges/9371463204800/>.
- The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Held in Uppsala 4 – 20 July 1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1968).
- U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, 1987. Break-Ins at Sanctuary Churches and Organizations Opposed to Administration Policy in Central America. 100th Congress, 1st Session.
- Wallis, Jim. "Christians and Contras." *Sojourners*, October 1985.
- Wallis, Jim. "The Rise of Christian Conscience: A New Movement Is Emerging in the Churches." *Sojourners*, January 1985.
- Wallis, Jim. "Witness for Peace." *Sojourners*, November 1983.
- Whelan, Matthew Philipp. *Blood in the Fields: Oscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020.
- Wilde, Melissa J. *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Wright, N.T. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. New York: HarperOne Publishing, 2012.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Zolberg, Aristide R. *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Special to The New York Times. "Why they Fight: Rebels Tell their Stories." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 24, 1985.
<https://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/historical-newspapers/why-they-fight-rebels-tell-their-stories/docview/111138928/se-2?accountid=5683>.