

7-6-2017

# Sanctuary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/daca-dapa-project-publications>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Immigration Law Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

*Sanctuary* (2017),

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.uci.edu/daca-dapa-project-publications/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Southern California Deferred Action (DACA, DACA+, DAPA) Project at UCI Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Project Publications by an authorized administrator of UCI Law Scholarly Commons.

# Sanctuary

July 06, 2017

**By Susan Bibler Coutin**  
**University of California,**  
**Irvine**

SHARE



Flickr

As campuses, restaurants,  
churches, and cities  
nationwide have adopted  
sanctuary policies to

sanctuary policies to protect students, employees, customers, and residents from President Trump's ramped up efforts to deport members of immigrant communities, it is worthwhile to consider how the lessons of the 1980s sanctuary movement might apply to today's advocacy work. Between 1986 and 1988, I conducted participant observation within sanctuary communities in Tucson, Arizona and the San Francisco East Bay in California. At that time, sanctuary focused on obtaining refuge for asylum seekers who were fleeing U.S-funded wars in Central America. I attended sanctuary events, volunteered with the movement, and interviewed over 100 participants, leading to publication of my 1993

publication of my 1999

book, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement*.

Congregations that declared themselves sanctuaries during the 1980s were motivated by a sense of emergency. Civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala had led to death squad activity, assassinations, disappearances, torture, and widespread displacement, yet the United States, which was funding Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments, denied Central Americans' asylum applications at a rate of 97-99%. Religious activists who met Central Americans felt compelled to take action. One

participant told me, "When I met Central American refugees face-to-face, it

was transforming. When I

was astonishing. When I heard their stories, when I saw them cry, it was gut-wrenching for me. I knew I had to do something.”

Though the movement took its name from the prototypical practice of housing an asylum seeker within a congregation, sanctuary workers also organized vigils and demonstrations, publicized human rights violations, prepared asylum applications, assisted border crossers, lobbied Congress, raised bail bond money, and provided social services. The movement was also transnational in that U.S. activists traveled to Central America to accompany at-risk communities, while Central Americans also took on leadership roles within the movement.

Sanctuary work

challenged existing power

challenged existing power structures. U.S. movement members were prosecuted for alien smuggling and conspiracy and some Central American participants were placed in deportation proceedings. Though sanctuary has sometimes been characterized as civil disobedience, movement members argued that they were practicing *civil initiative*, that is, taking actions to enforce international and U.S. refugee laws that their government was violating. Their legal efforts had long-term impacts. In 1997, Congress passed the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, which, in the long run, allowed Salvadorans and Guatemalans who had sought asylum during the 1980s to become lawful

1980s to become lawful

permanent residents.

The fact that communities are once again resorting to declaring themselves sanctuaries is a sign of the dire sense of emergency experienced by many noncitizens. As was the case in the 1980s, sanctuary today takes multiple forms, ranging from efforts to integrate immigrant populations to policies that limit local police agencies' collaboration with federal immigration enforcement. These practices also challenge power structures, as evidenced by the Trump administration's threat to prevent sanctuary jurisdictions from receiving federal funding. As was the case in the 1980s, sanctuary today transcends borders through both international collaborations

and the leadership of

and the leadership of  
immigrant-activists. And,  
just as sanctuary practices  
in the 1980s led to  
unforeseen outcomes in the  
1990s, so too are today's  
actions likely to shape the  
course of law and policy in  
ways that cannot now be  
predicted.

[SHARE](#)

Popular posts from this blog

## On writing

January 04, 2019

By [Susan](#)

[Sterett](#)

Law & Society

Revi ...

[SHARE](#)

[READ MORE](#)

# Thank You to our 2017 Review ers

May 22, 2018

This journal  
would not  
exist without  
the ...

[SHARE](#)

[READ MORE](#)

# A difficul t road ahead for asylum

# asylum rights advoca cy

July 21, 2018

*A  
commentary  
on Matter of  
A-B* ...

SHARE

READ MORE



Archive



---

Labels



---

Report Abuse

 Powered by Blogger