The Sanctuary Movement in the Bay Area

This timeline exposes the role of the United States government in contributing to instability in Central America and the critical actions of people who spoke out against injustice to protect those fleeing violence. This is a small snapshot of the many refugees and activists who have fought tirelessly for political representation and human rights — a reminder of a long and ongoing struggle.

Empathy, Healing and Justice through Storytelling

Amplifying Sanctuary Voices highlights stories of people who have come to the U.S. seeking safety from persecution and violence in their country of origin. People bravely tell their stories, from leaving home to building a new one here in the United States. These are the voices often excluded from our mainstream dialogue.
Acknowledgments

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Primary Authors: Lisa Hoffman and Sister Maureen Duignan
Editors: Rebecca Gerny and Sarah Frisch
Designed by: Noelle Nunez
Photos: Archived by Stuart Pawsey
Contributors: Peggy Argueta, Kristen Constanza, Manuel de Paz, Aria Fani, Lisa Gano, Matt Matusiewicz, Javier Mejia, Amelia Mineiro, Katelyn Nomura-Weingrow, Glenda Pawsey, Heber Santos, Michael Smith

ASV Leadership Team: Ela Banerjee, Michele Castro, Kristen Constanza, Brianna Adia Davis, Carrie Donovan, Aria Fani, Rebecca Gerny, Lisa Hoffman, Fabiola Lopez, Matt Matusiewicz, Anjali Mehta, Daphne Morgen

ASV Volunteers: Lynn Adler, Juan Enriquez, Gandari Galindo, Sofia Barahona Mena, JD Mireles, Nerine Ortiz Pon, Shabnam Piryaei

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The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, grounded in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and recognizing the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries, is the centerpiece of international refugee protection today.
1967

International community signs refugee protection agreements

146 countries, including the U.S., sign the United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, defining refugee status and establishing the rights of refugees not to be sent back to their countries of origin.
Berkeley churches publicly announce sanctuary

Berkeley becomes the first U.S. sanctuary city by providing refuge to people who are unwilling to participate in the Vietnam War.
Political repression had been going on in Argentina for several years; President Carter was moved to seek the release of 500 such prisoners if sponsors could be found. St. John’s youth group sponsored Claudio Vasquez, a young man who had spent three years in prison, and later, Horacio Martinez Baca, a high profile prisoner. These sponsorships were legal and at the instigation of the U.S. government.”

— Rev. Bob McKenzie
1980

**U.S. Refugee Act is passed**

Written by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Carter, the act guarantees asylum if a person is “unable to avail him/herself of the protection of his or her country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, or political opinion.”
February 17: Archbishop Oscar Romero asks President Carter to stop U.S. military aid to El Salvador

Romero’s letter describes the Salvadoran government’s “systematic violation of human rights” where “political power is in the hands of unscrupulous military officers who know only how to repress the people and favor the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy.”

Romero asks Carter to “guarantee that the U.S. government will not intervene directly or indirectly with military, economic, diplomatic, or other pressures, in determining the destiny of the Salvadoran people.”
Mons. Oscar Arnulfo Romero
9º Aniversario de su martirio

"La Iglesia no puede ser sorda a las súplicas de los pobres y necesitados, porque en ellos clama el Espíritu Santo"
(Mons. Romero, Orientación 11 septiembre 1977)
1980

March 24: Assassination of Archbishop Romero

Five weeks after writing to President Carter, Archbishop Romero is assassinated while saying mass at the Hospital of the Divine Providence. To date, the Salvadoran government has failed to bring anyone to trial for this crime.
1980

December 2: Four U.S. missionaries are raped and murdered by the El Salvador National Guard

The murders, and attempts by the Salvadoran military and some American officials to cover them up, generate grassroots opposition in the U.S. and ignite intense debate over U.S. policy in El Salvador. President Carter suspends aid to El Salvador but later reinstates it.
END U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE WAR IN EL SALVADOR

“In the name of God, stop the repression.”
—slain Archbishop Oscar Romero

INTERFAITH MORATORIUM CAMPAIGN
January 20: President Reagan is inaugurated and begins funding military elites in Central America

The Reagan administration considers Central America a Cold War theater and provides training, weapons, and billions of dollars to military governments fighting Marxist popular movements and contra rebels fighting Nicaragua’s socialist Sandinista government.

To evade the U.S. congressional ban on supporting human rights violations, the administration denies Amnesty International reports that Central American governments had disappeared thousands of civilians and displaced and abused indigenous communities in Guatemala.
Around 75,000 people were killed during the war in El Salvador, 40,000 died in Nicaragua and over 200,000 (disproportionately indigenous) people died in Guatemala.
December 11: The Salvadoran Army, trained and sponsored by the U.S. Army, massacres close to 1,000 people in El Mozote

The U.S. State Department repeatedly lies about the massacre and initially denies news reports that it had even happened. After the massacre, Reagan continues to ignore atrocities unfolding in Central America.

At the height of the Guatemalan genocide, Reagan justifies continued funding to the Guatemalan military by signing white papers swearing that human rights in Guatemala are improving.
Most are fleeing political repression and violence in Guatemala and El Salvador, though some flee Nicaragua in the wake of the 1979 Revolution. The Reagan administration insists Central Americans arriving in the U.S. are economically motivated and deports tens of thousands of people without informing them of the possibility of applying for refugee status. Considering the widely documented human rights violations in El Salvador and Guatemala, the treatment of these migrants constitutes a violation of U.S. obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention.
1980s

Refugees are detained and held in Oakland jails

The jails are for-profit detention centers with low-paid, non-union jobs. EBSC starts a jail visitation program to connect detained refugees with pro bono legal help through the San Francisco Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights.
Stop the INS jail!

ATTEND THE OAKLAND CITY COUNCIL MEETING
TUESDAY, MAY 9, 1989, AT 7:00 P.M.
JOAQUIN MILLER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
5525 ASCOT DRIVE

FOR DIRECTIONS:
CALL 531-8918

DETENTION CITY

- On April 25th the Oakland City Council violated our City of Refuge Resolution and authorized Esmor, Inc. to establish a detention center in West Oakland under an INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) contract.
- The INS violates International Law by refusing to recognize the Refugee status of Haitians, South Africans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans. It returns them to death and torture in their homelands.

JOBS AS JAILERS

- Esmor, Inc., a corporation doing the INS' bidding, promised West Oakland 44 jobs requiring Spanish language competence. However, organized labor opposes it because it will offer low paid non-union jobs. Also building INS jails in poor neighborhoods divides our community.

WHERE IS THE INS TAKING US?

- INS reports that $80,000,000 is available this year nationwide for INS "detention centers" to detain and deport undocumented immigrants and subject our communities to raids, false detentions and other harassments.

Oakland City of Retention!!

WHAT MUST WE DO?

- Contact our newspapers, City Council members, County Board of Supervisors, Assembly people, and Congressional representatives.
- Join and contribute money to STOP THE INS DETENTION CENTER COALITION. phone: 261-0159
4067 Santa Rita St., Oakland 94601
Throughout the 1980s, less than 2% of Salvadorans and 1% of Guatemalans were granted asylum, compared with other nationalities being approved at an average rate of 31%.
By 1986, EBSC is a 31-member organization with a mission to “protect, support, and advocate” on behalf of Central American refugees, end military aid to El Salvador and Guatemala, and educate the public about why refugees were fleeing.

To assist those living under oppressive regimes, EBSC monitors and protests human rights abuses, establishes sister communities, and provides accompaniment — international presence — to support reparation. EBSC also organizes nonviolent actions and legislative advocacy to change U.S. foreign policy and end military aid to Central America.
On March 24, 1982, five Berkeley congregations publicly declared their response to the plight of the 60,000 recently arrived Salvadoran refugees in the Bay Area. The congregations declared "sanctuary," signing a covenant to protect, support and advocate on behalf of these "sojourners in our midst."

As of December 1986, twenty-five faith communities from all over the East Bay have covenanted together in this ministry, and more will join us soon...
1982

EBSC establishes the Central American Delegation Program and Speakers Bureau

Sanctuary churches send North Americans to visit refugee camps to learn and report back on what is really happening in Central America. The goal is to listen to refugees and inform the U.S. public about why refugees are fleeing and what they can do to help.
“In January 1982, we were approached to sponsor Omar and Ingrid Mayorga and their infant son, who had fled the military assault on their campus in San Salvador and entered the U.S. illegally. Soon after, pastors from five congregations met and Gus Schultz asked, ‘Why don’t our congregations declare sanctuary for illegal refugees fleeing repression in Central America?’ It was decided that St. John’s would take the lead and invite the other four churches to join us in a covenant of sanctuary. And so, the idea of sanctuary was born.”

– Reverend Bob McKenzie, St. John’s Presbyterian Church, Berkeley
1982-1986

Hundreds of faith communities join the Sanctuary Movement

In just a few years, the Sanctuary Movement grows to more than five hundred congregations across the country. Faith communities create an underground railroad to transport people from southern Mexico to sanctuary churches across the U.S., raise money to bond people out of detention, facilitate legal representation, and organize public education campaigns to raise awareness about U.S. involvement in Central American civil wars.
Refugees find haven in burgeoning sanctuary network

Central American refugees at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, Calif., are about to be received into sanctuary by seven churches that are joining the sanctuary movement.

San Salvador for the funeral, he was at the national cathedral when Salvadoran troops opened fire on mourners. Church leaders got an additional shock the following December when American women — three nuns and a lay worker — were murdered outside San Salvador.

The impact both these events had was a sanctification of our institutional church, by our hierarchy, to enter this (sanctuary) work full-force," says Bileen Purcell, coordinator of Central American refugee services for Catholic Social Services.

San Salvador was the largest Salvadoran community in the United States. An estimated 60,000 Salvadorans had settled in the area by the late 1970s.

The concept of public sanctuary was introduced in the Bay Area during the Vietnam War. In 1971, the city of Berkeley and a few area churches - Schults' University Lutheran Chapel among them - announced that they would provide sanctuary to soldiers and sailors hoping to avoid service in Vietnam. During the 1970s, Bay Area churches also aided legal and illegal immigrants from Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Argentina and Chile.

After Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated on March 24, 1980, Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco traveled to San Salvador at the request of the Berkeley clergy. Their idea was to shield refugees from deportation and at the same time give them a public forum to talk about conditions in their country. While still discussing the idea, the Berkeley group heard that John Fife's Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson was considering the same thing.

On March 24, 1982, the second anniversary of Romero's murder, Fife's church declared itself a sanctuary. University Lutheran Chapel, with the support of four other Berkeley congregations, made a similar announcement. That afternoon, three Salvadoran men moved in.

The offices of the Central Ameri-
STOP DEPORTATIONS, NO INTERVENTION, CRECE DETERMINATION FOR EL SALVADOR!!
1982

May 2: 100,000 people march on the Capitol to protest U.S. military involvement in El Salvador

Activists and refugees launch national caravans to pressure the U.S. government to stop military aid to Central America. Federal agents raid the caravans and arrest the refugees as “illegal aliens.”
THE SECOND NATIONAL CARAVAN OF SALVADORANS FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

I support the National Referendum to End the War in Central America:

☑ Yes  □ No
SUPPORTERS of the six sanctuary workers arraigned in Phoenix on Jan. 23 marched through the city's downtown last week. The scheduled appearance of the prayer service, sanctuary symposium in Tuscon, Coffin said, Eastern regional office, Asked if Burlington re
1984-1985

“Sanctuary Trials”

A ten-month investigation conducted by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Anti-Smuggling Unit into the Sanctuary Movement and what they referred to pejoratively as the “so-called underground railroad” results in the indictment of religious leaders for violating numerous federal immigration laws.

At the trial, the court forbids the defendants from referring to the atrocities in Central America, U.S. foreign policy, international law regarding refugees, bias in the asylum process, or even the defendants' religious beliefs.
Refugees risk deportation by sharing their stories of war, repression, flight, and search for safe haven in public.
May: American Baptist Churches (ABC) v. Thornburgh

Following the Sanctuary Trials, a coalition of religious, legal assistance, and human rights organizations — including the ACLU, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the National Lawyers Guild — file a class action lawsuit against INS, the Executive Office for Immigration Review, and the Department of State.

Plaintiffs argue that Central American refugees were discriminated against in asylum seeking processes in direct violation of the Refugee Act of 1980.
1986

**July 28: Oakland passes City of Refuge Resolution**

The mayor and city council declare Oakland a “City of Refuge,” stating that the city will not cooperate with INS investigations (within legal limits), will not prosecute anyone giving sanctuary to refugees, and will facilitate access to support services for refugees being held in Oakland City Jail.
“We listened to the refugees’ stories and opened our churches, synagogues, homes, schools, and hospitals in defiance of U.S. immigration policy, which many of us viewed as immoral and illegal. We fought side by side with the refugees to change U.S. and foreign policies. We journeyed to Central America to stand in solidarity with the people there.”

– Eileen Purcell, Co-founder of EBSC
“The refugees we have helped have asked us to work to end the aid that is destroying their countries and preventing their return home... We feel that working against war-related aid is one of the most important ways to be an advocate on behalf of refugees.”

- EBSC Letter to Sanctuary Congregations
1989

March 5: EBSC appeals to sanctuary congregations to take a more active role in opposing U.S. aid which is financing the wars in El Salvador and Guatemala

In the letter, EBSC writes:

“In El Salvador, the U.S. has spent over three billion since 1980. According to a congressional study, more than two-thirds of this money has gone to wage war. This aid has not ended the war or helped establish democracy; in fact, in the last year, both the level of fighting and the number of human rights abuses increased sharply...the U.S. aid has enabled the wealthy elite and armed forces to continue the war and ignore the legitimate aspirations of the majority of the population.”
NOVEMBER 16, 1989
SIX JESUIT PRIESTS, THEIR COOK AND HER DAUGHTER KILLED BY THE SALVADORAN MILITARY - SUPPORTED BY U.S. TAX DOLLARS.
1989

November 16: Six Jesuit priests, their cook, and her 16-year-old daughter are murdered in El Salvador

As modern-day martyrs in one of the most high-profile religious crimes in recent Latin American history, the murders draw the world's attention to the crisis in El Salvador. Following the atrocities, Congress faces mounting pressure to end American support of the brutal military regime.
Dear Sanctuary Congregations, March 5, 1989

We are writing you at this time because we believe it is necessary for us, as Sanctuary Congregations, to take a more active role in opposing United States aid which is financing the wars in El Salvador and Guatemala.

In El Salvador the United States has spent over three billion since 1980. According to a congressional study, more than two-thirds of this money has gone to wage war. This aid has not ended the war or helped establish democracy, in fact, in the last year both the level of fighting and the number of human rights abuses increased sharply. Rather than contributing to a solution to the conflict, the U.S. aid has enabled the wealthy elite and the armed forces to continue the war and ignore the legitimate aspirations of the majority of the population. U.S. military aid to Guatemala was resumed in 1986, after having been stopped in 1977 because of the government's human rights record. In spite of an increase in the violation of human rights by the Guatemalan armed forces, the total U.S. aid to Guatemala exceeded 200 million in 1987.

This spring congress will have its first formal vote on aid to El Salvador in two years, and its first real reconsideration of U.S. policy since 1981. There is a real possibility that congress will make cuts in the aid requested for El Salvador. A number of resolutions have been introduced that would substantially cut the military aid to El Salvador, and one, introduced by Rep. Kastenmeier (D-Wisconsin), would cut it off entirely. None of these will pass without a lot of grass roots support.

Until now, EBSC has not made opposition to war-related aid a direct focus of our work, but we believe it is now urgent that we support these congressional efforts to end the tragic wars in Central America. Since the first East Bay congregations declared sanctuary in 1982 the refugees we have helped have asked us to work to end the aid that is destroying their countries and preventing their return home. According to our Covenant, the task of sanctuary is to provide "support, protection, and advocacy" to Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. We feel that working against war-related aid is one of the most important ways to truly be an advocate on behalf of refugees.
December 19: Landmark ABC lawsuit is settled

After five years, the ABC lawsuit is settled, establishing Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans and a path for residency for Salvadorans and Guatemalans, as well as other benefits.
Landmark settlement in refugee discrimination case

On December 19, a victorious settlement was reached in the case, *American Baptist Churches et al v. Thornburgh et al*. Originally filed in May 1985 by 70 religious and refugee assistance organizations, this suit challenged the discriminatory practices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in deciding political asylum claims of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. (See “Asylum Case Promises to Set Precedent,” in *Exodus*, November 1990, for further background information.) The settlement requires the INS to stop the deportation of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees now in the U.S. and to reconsider the claims of all those denied asylum since 1980. The role of the U.S. State Department in the asylum process is curbed by this settlement. As many as 150,000 cases may be reconsidered. Up to 500,000 Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees may be affected by the settlement.

We hail this landmark settlement and hope it will truly lead to fair decisions in political asylum cases.
1992

Peace Accords are signed in El Salvador but do not end violence and instability

The peace agreements lead to the formation of an underfunded national police force and the beginning of a fragile democracy in El Salvador. The ARENA Party, founded by torturer and death-squad leader Colonel Roberto D’Aubuisson, wins the elections, ensuring that the military maintains its hold on power.
1993

**U.S. begins deporting gang members with disastrous consequences**

Without support and social services, some young Central American refugees settle in violent, segregated neighborhoods and gravitate toward gangs for protection and camaraderie. Two international gangs — MS-13 and Barrio 18 — are founded in Los Angeles.

Between 1993 and 2005, the U.S. deports more than 50,000 people with criminal records back to Central America, effectively transplanting U.S.-founded gangs to an already war-torn and unstable region. The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have no re-integration policy or support programs; they enlist the gangs and use them to cover their own corrupt activities. The gangs grow, laying the groundwork for the current conditions that are forcing people to flee for their lives.
The stories continue...

This timeline includes only some events that contributed to destabilization in Central America and caused a mass exodus of people leaving their homes to seek safety in the U.S.

Human rights abuses happen globally, sometimes with U.S. government support.

Today, the Sanctuary Movement continues to grow; bringing together people of conscience to speak out against immoral policies and human rights violations and provide safety to those fleeing persecution and violence.

We encourage everyone to learn more about the U.S.’s role in fomenting violence in Central America and its disastrous and ongoing consequences. We hope this will allow for more compassion for those who are harmed by these policies.
About Us

Amplifying Sanctuary Voices (ASV) is a community-based oral history project that centers the stories of people who have come to the U.S. seeking sanctuary. We aim to create space in the mainstream political conversation for the diverse voices and experiences of those impacted by policy decisions and stimulate dialogue through immersive events and interviews.

ASV is a coalition of community organizations including East Bay Sanctuary Covenant, the Public Service Center at UC Berkeley, Inside the Living Room, Voice of Witness, Youth UnMuted, and 1951 Coffee. ASV was made possible with support from California Humanities, a non-profit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities (calhum.org), the UC Berkeley Chancellor’s Community Partnership Fund, and individual donors and volunteers.