

8135:9/88

HISTORIC

AMERICAN BAPTIST RESOLUTION ON CHURCH SANCTUARY FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES

Preamble

On January 14, 1985, two congregations of the American Baptist Churches were confronted with the authority of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Immigration agents arrested seven Salvadorans accorded sanctuary by the University Baptist Church of Seattle, Washington, and two Salvadorans extended sanctuary by a coalition of churches in Rochester, New York, which included the American Baptist House Church. On the same day, 16 sanctuary workers were indicted in Phoenix, Arizona. The refugees arrested in Seattle and Rochester were among approximately 60 Central American refugees picked up and processed, according to the U.S. Attorney in Phoenix, Arizona, to "keep them from running elsewhere when they heard about the indictments." All of the arrested refugees had sought safe haven in U.S. churches.

In a Statement of Concern on "Peace with Justice in Central America," the delegates to the 1983 Biennial Meeting of the American Baptist Churches affirmed "the historic and courageous actions of American Baptist Churches providing sanctuary to Central American refugees" and called upon the U.S. Government to "grant temporary asylum to Central American Refugees until they can safely return to their countries." The "Resolution on Central America," adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches in June 1984, commends respect for "those churches that, responding to the leading of God's Spirit, are providing sanctuary for refugees fleeing certain suffering and death in Central America," and, further, "that we urge our government to accept as refugees those who out of extremity and fear for their lives flee to our shores." These declarations and our continuing concern are rooted in biblical faith which commands hospitality for "the stranger in our midst" (Exodus 23:9), in the understanding of what our faith requires of us in terms of human concern, and in policy statements previously adopted by the American Baptist Churches on human rights (December 1976) and on U.S. immigration and refugee policy (June 1982). The God of Israel was the first to proclaim sanctuary, commanding Moses to set aside cities in Canaan where people could seek asylum from the "blood avengers." The cities of refuge were for the Israelites, "as well as the stranger and sojourner among you" (Numbers 35:15). God, acting through the faithful, created a cultural/political structure to ensure that justice would be done. Sanctuary was to be more than a secure hiding place; it was to be a prophetic plan of action to take up "my cause against the people who have no pity" (Psalm 43:1-2).

Painfully fresh in memory is that church and society in our own country by and large "looked away" while the Jewish victims of Naziism sought asylum in the United States. That experience has made us sensitive to the plight of persons escaping countries where the population is terrorized by bombings, death squads, and the "disappearance" of citizens. In the last five years, the fabric of life of El Salvador has been severely ruptured by long-festering economic and political ills. Fighting has engulfed the nation and threatened the civilian population. Tens of thousands of civilians may have been killed since 1979; populations of whole villages have been displaced. Persons fleeing the civil strife have crossed our borders to find the refuge which they desperately need. Congregations of our denomination and other communions have risen to the occasion and publicly declared their churches to be a sanctuary for endangered people. They are offering the asylum which our own government routinely denies. The present situation is not attributable to the violation of immigration laws by refugees, or religiously motivated persons endeavoring to assist them, but to the unwillingness of the U.S. Administration and INS to abide by international covenants and practices to which our government has subscribed and which have been incorporated into U.S. law. Many sanctuary supporters testify that as persons of faith they have a religious obligation and even a constitutional right under the First Amendment's clause on free exercise of religion to protect and extend humanitarian aid to Central Americans fleeing oppression in their homelands.

Church sanctuaries for refugees bear witness to the same moral values which inspired the underground railroad for escaped slaves before the Civil War. Persons participating in sanctuary hold an ambivalent position. "Having violated no law, we should not have to suffer consequences;" or, "we are deliberately violating the law to focus attention on the issue to become martyrs so that we can take the consequences and the public will then become aware."

Commands of Conscience

The General Board of the American Baptist Churches now affirms our full support for the persons and churches participating in the movement to provide Christian sustenance and care to refugees from Central America. We acknowledge that these acts of outreach may be considered civil disobedience and may subject the participants to severe sanctions.

We maintain that the questionable covert methods employed in the preparation for the January 14 arrest, e.g. one informant infiltrated the sanctuary movement wearing a body tape recorder in religious services, constitutes a serious violation of the sanctity of the church.

We especially express our dismay at the request of the government to the court trying persons involved in the sanctuary movement to exclude testimony relating to personal religious faith, political conditions in Central American nations, and interpretation of immigration laws. The preclusion of this line of defense denies the admission of crucial evidence and gives sanction to government caprice in the treatment of immigration law. In 1985 more than 200 known churches in the U.S. and an estimated 70,000 persons were

active in the sanctuary movement. We believe Congress and INS should seriously review the issues surrounding the plight of the Central American refugees which prompt the expression of concern and charity on the part of so many citizens.

We, therefore, urge our churches to:

- study and examine the issues of peace and injustice in Central America and the involvement and responsibility of the United States as a neighboring country; and
- commit themselves prayerfully to minister to Central American refugees and support all who as a matter of conscience and faith participate in the sanctuary movement.

We, further, call upon our churches and the General Secretary of our denomination to press Congress immediately to:

- investigate and clarify government policy relative to the treatment of undocumented refugees from Central America;
- enact legislation granting temporary refugee status to persons fleeing imminent personal danger in their Central American homeland, regardless of U.S. support of the governments of such homelands; and
- investigate and take necessary legislative action to prevent further clandestine operations of the government to infiltrate the sanctuary movement.

We rejoice in and welcome the growing evidence that congregations consider faith to be more than a matter of worship and are compelled to witness to persons who suffer injustice and who stand in need of protection.

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - June 1985

155 For, 4 Against, 7 Abstentions

Modified by the Executive Committee of the General Board - September 1988

(General Board Reference # - 8135:9/88)

POLICY BASE

American Baptist Policy Statement on Immigration and Refugee Policy

5. Engage in wholistic ministry to immigrants, refugees, migrants, and overstayed and undocumented persons in Immigration and Naturalization Service detention facilities and

refugee camps in the United States and in local communities, offering assistance in such areas as:

- (a) fellowship - establishing social and spiritual community
 - (b) worship and evangelism
 - (c) civic education
 - (d) language training
 - (e) counseling - documentation, employment, citizenship, financial, cultural pluralism.
-