

### **Episode 3: The Sanctuary Movement in the Midwest**

**IC:** Hello, welcome to our podcast where we discuss the Sanctuary Movement, a movement in the United States since the 1980s. The Sanctuary Movement began as a way to harbor and aid migrants crossing the southern border, primarily from Central America. Now the movement focuses on those facing deportation, especially as immigration enforcement has increased in recent years under the Trump administration.

**AM:** While it began in the Church and is still heavily influenced by religion, the Sanctuary Movement has widely spread to secular circles as a result of the recent resurgence and the politicization of immigration. Today's guest is someone who's a central leader in helping immigrants in the Midwest.

**IC:** My name is Isabelle Caban. I am a sophomore at Amherst College, and I use she/her pronouns.

**AM:** Hi, my name is Angel Musyimi. I'm also a sophomore at Amherst College, and I also use she/her pronouns. And today we have a special guest speaker.

Dr. Sergio González is a professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He's an assistant professor of Latinx Studies and his departments are history and languages, literatures, and cultures. He's part of current sanctuary organizing in Wisconsin and is the leader and co-founder of the Dane Sanctuary Coalition and a board member of *Voces de la Frontera*, which is Wisconsin's most active membership-based immigrant and worker justice organization. His scholarship focuses on the development of Latinx communities in the Sanctuary 1980s Movement in the Midwest. So welcome Sergio, thank you for being here. And we're so excited to hear about your work, especially about how you first got acquainted with the movement if you wanted to go into that for us.

**SG:** Yeah. Hi, thanks for having me here. I really appreciate it. My work as an active participant in the Sanctuary Movement began in late 2016, early 2017, and it was a consequence really of the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency. The, following the election, there was a call from the Latino community to Madison, Wisconsin's religious community to really step up its efforts to serve not only as allies, but actually serve in solidarity with immigrant communities that were really starting to feel the pressure and were worried about what the new presidency would mean for efforts to detain and deport specifically undocumented members of our communities.

When that call came out, I was a graduate student at UW Madison pursuing my PhD in history. And my research broadly was looking at the way in which faith spaces have served as places for

community formation and social movements for Latinx people in Wisconsin across the 20th century. And in, as part of my research, I had developed this chapter, this history on the 1980s Sanctuary Movement in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1980s. And so when that call came out from the Latinx community in Madison, I found that I perhaps had like a certain set of skills that could be useful for the development of this growing movement, this nascent movement across the United States, this New Sanctuary Movement that was developing, and so I jumped right into the efforts. And from there, I worked alongside Madisonians from different religious, ethnic, racial, documentation backgrounds to help develop the Dane Sanctuary Coalition.

**IC:** Awesome, that sounds super cool. And I think also because you specifically work with the movement in the Midwest and definitely when I heard about this, I was like, 'oh, like I had never heard about any movement in the Midwest' cuz mainly we had been focusing on Tucson and just Southwest in general. And so I guess, like what do you think is unique or different about the movement in the Midwest compared to other regions such as the Southwest where it started?

**SG:** Well, I think the first thing that makes it unique is that people don't know about it, as you kind of pointed out there. It's part of my larger research to really plant the flag of Latinx presence in the Midwest. And, you know, I'm certainly not the first to engage in this work as a historian. There's a long lineage of historians who have been doing this work. And over the last decade or so, there's a growing cohort of scholars who've really done their work to show how Latinx people have lived in this region for over a century and how the fact their historical presence is so long should really complicate the way in which we think about Latinx communities in the region, but across the United States as well.

You know, there are a lot of things that make Latinx presence in the Midwest different from, let's say the Southwest or the Northeast or places like Florida. There are things like the fact that most people who come to this region, of course have to migrate as opposed to the Southwest where there has been a historical presence even before was part of the country or Florida as well. Historically, the Midwest has had a really diverse Latinx population, right? So Milwaukee, for example, in the 1960s, its Latinx population was about 60 percent Mexican descent, 40 percent Puerto Rican descent. So you don't see that type of diversity in, at least historically in places like Los Angeles or New York. Today you do, but not across the 20th century. And that's the story in places like Chicago and Detroit as well. And so I think all of that kind of colors, the way in which Latinx people have defined themselves in the Midwest and the way in which others have defined Latinx people as kind of a conglomerate group of individuals and communities in this region as well.

The other thing, of course, that's really important to note in the 1980s sanctuary context, as opposed to the US Southwest, which is right along the borderlands region, Central American refugees when they arrived in the US were obviously not arriving in Chicago and they weren't

arriving in Milwaukee. So their migration to that region had to be facilitated. It had to be planned by organizations like the Chicago Religious Task Force for Central America. And to do that really required a lot of efforts between different racial groups in different religious groups and different political groups.

Today, I think the history of the Sanctuary, the New Sanctuary Movement in the Midwest is a lot more similar to what's happening in places like Los Angeles and New York and Florida. One of perhaps the biggest distinctions is the presence of immigration enforcement, right? So it's not as concentrated in a place like Milwaukee, but it certainly is in a place like Chicago. And I think the thing that makes the Midwest similar to those places is the Department of Homeland Security's kind of jurisdiction, which really extends across the borderlines region. And because much of the Midwest is actually within the borderlands, not the US-Mexico borderlands but the Canadian-US borderlands, there is a really significant ICE presence and Border Patrol presence all along the region in a way that people might not assume, but it's certainly there as well.

**AM:** Yeah, that's definitely something I think people forget to consider that there's another border besides the one that's in the south along Mexico. But kind of speaking to what you're talking about, like the diversity that you see in community in general, you said in the chapter that "Midwestern Latinos have turned to faith communities to provide for economic and social needs, foster relationships, reinforce customs, and validate individual and community identity all the while promoting a sense of fellowship among congregants," basically pointing out that not only the physical manipulation of spaces but also the relationships and networks that are created within the spaces. So could you talk about the significance of the church as not only a physical location for building those networks, but also the ways that those connections have created long-lasting benefits for undocumented immigrants?

**SG:** That's a fantastic question, and I really appreciate it. I mean, it goes to the heart of what I'm trying to understand and the way in which religion can be a form of place-making, and a way of place-making that really forces us to think about place-making not just says like the physical creation of space, but the way in which we create place amongst ourselves and in a relationship that we build with each other and the coalitions that we build and the social movements that we create and the energies that come out of that as well. And so I think the intersections that we see between place-making as being not just the physical space and faith not just being a physical space is the way in which the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s understood the church as not being a physical location but the church being the people, right? And so we can often get kind of fixated on the idea that for one use the word 'church,' you think of a physical structure with the steeple and some sort of religious iconography associated with it. But in reality, when we go back to the roots of Christianity and the roots of many religions, the church is developed within homes spaces, right, and the way in which people build community and the way in which they

bring their faith out. And it doesn't necessarily need that physical structure that has designated as a church for faith to flourish and for people to feel like they are in church.

Now the one distinction that sanctuary produces within this, of course, is that the power of the Sanctuary Movement relies both on the creation of faith spaces, which are spaces that don't have to be physically defined, but it does necessitate a physical space where the person seeking asylum or seeking safe harbor is going to flee to, right? So you actually need that physical space for in the 1980s a Central American refugee or in 2021 for a person who is undocumented looking for safe harbor needs to actually go into. And so it kind of complicates the way we think about faith and space and place-making in that it can be both that physical location, but it doesn't just have to be that.

**AM:** Thank you.

**IC:** Yeah, so I wanted to reference the chapter that Angel had mentioned. It was your chapter that was published in February of 2020, the 'Churches Are Not Just Buildings, They Are People: Refugee Activism and Religious Spaces and the Midwestern Sanctuary Movement.' And I think one thing that I might question from that chapter is a quote that you mentioned from a Elaine Peña about quote, "looking to the sacred to address the secular," end quote in regards to how Latino communities have used religious values to address racial discrimination and economic exploitation. And I think my question is how can the sacred lens address the fact that the government/the law actively excludes religion from legal and political discourse, as well as its lack of acknowledgement of undocumented places at the governmental level? So I guess, like, how come you look to the sacred to address the secular when the secular doesn't ever pay attention to or acknowledge the sacred?

**SG:** That's a fantastic question. I think we have to understand the way in which social movements work on a variety of different levels, right, and the way in which the Sanctuary Movement kind of presents a perfect example to look at that. The Sanctuary Movement was this decade-long movement in the 1980s, and it was working on so many different registers. You know, one was kinda that direct action, kind of trying to stick the finger in the eye of the federal government by basically denying its authority by breaking the law and opening up its faith spaces to undocumented individuals that the federal government had deemed economic migrants.

But it was also engaged in court cases throughout the 1980s, right? And so religious organizations, churches and synagogues that were affiliated with the Sanctuary Movement, were also filing lawsuits against the federal government at the exact same time that they are engaging in what the federal government refers to as illegal activities: engaging in this work of safe harbor. And those lawsuits ultimately end in the early 1990s with a series of court cases that go against the federal government. The, these churches and these synagogues are successful in suing

the federal government and alleging that it hadn't actually lived up to the two obligations that it's supposed to live up to for refugees: the 1980 Refugee Act and international human rights law, which dictate that the United States government is supposed to look at each individual case of asylees entering the United States and judge their cases individually and not kind of *en masse* as they had.

And so it's a long process, right? You can't really just point to one moment in which the sacred does address the secular. It's kind of this, this large accumulation of events, and that's often how social movements work. And the thing that makes this, the Sanctuary Movement, I think really particular and interesting is that it did last a decade, right? It's not often that social movements last that long. Coalitions often form and they fizzle out after its objectives are met or when they're not met, and there are different infighting issues that might occur. And the Sanctuary Movement lasted a decade to the point where it won a certain amount of sizable victories for asylees. And it did so through the power of faith.

**AM:** Yeah. And again speaking to that intersection where the secular and sacred kind of intersect, would you consider today Midwestern Sanctuary Movement to be still in-type or as it was in Madison's first experimented practice of sanctuary in the sixties, in the midst of the anti-Vietnam practices? And, in general, do you think that sanctuary is still as politically centered as it was in the '80s?

**SG:** That's a fantastic question. I think the movement today is much less focused on some of those larger issues connected to militarization and connected to American intervention abroad. I think that the 1980s movement was principally focused on that question that Central American Studies often forces us to think about, which is to say, 'before I was here, you were there.' This idea that before Central American refugees were forced to come to United States, the United States government was intervening in those countries to begin with, right? And the Sanctuary Movement today is just not as focused on those issues.

And there's a few different reasons why. I think, principally, because the people who are entering sanctuary today are coming from so many different national backgrounds, and so it's really hard to create a unified message in the same way that was possible in the 1980s movement. The 1980s movement was directed specifically at US intervention in Central America, and today you have people living in sanctuary who come from all around the world. And that's not to say that the United States hasn't played a role in destabilizing the nation that those people originally came from, but when you're thinking of developing kind of like a really unified, slogan-y type of social movement messaging, it's a lot harder to do so today.

The movement today has shifted in its focus as well, right? It's very much focused on the idea of keeping families here, so this family-centered approach. Certain scholars have talked about the

way in which the New Sanctuary Movement has kind of shifted away from questions of political dissidence and more on questions of 'people have lived in this nation for numbers of decades. They are Americans in all but legal status. They should be kept here with their communities and their families,' right? So it's a very different type of messaging. It's a very different type of political goals that the new movement is trying to achieve.

**AM:** Thank you.

**IC:** What is your hope for the future of sanctuary in the Midwest? And I think this could also be a point if you want to talk a little bit about the Dane Sanctuary Coalition and what you hope for the future or even *Voces de la Frontera* as well.

**SG:** That's a great question. I don't know if I have any big aspirations for the movement. I have been really inspired by the way in which the movement can be really reflexive and critical of itself at times. And there are a number of scholars today who are engaging in the work of looking at sanctuary not just kind of in this triumphalist and really romantic way of thinking of social movements but also the way in which it can sometimes fail asylees and it can fail undocumented members of our communities.

And so I'm always heartened when members of the movement are reflexive in their practices and try to do better in the work that they do. The thing that I always remind my students and also organizations when I speak with them is that sanctuary is a tool. It is not an end of itself, right? And so it's part of a larger movement for immigrant justice and for migrant justice in the United States. And so I think the more that members of sanctuary organizations and the Midwest recognize that, the better it will be. To understand that sanctuary is just one part of a larger movement to destabilize the way in which the United States has traditionally thought of its immigration and migration systems and the way in which it's treated people who are considered migrants and immigrants and refugees in the United States.

I actually haven't been active in the Dane Sanctuary Coalition for some time. I graduated from my PhD, with my PhD in Madison, and I left the city. I left it in good hands with people who continue to do really fantastic work. The Dane Sanctuary Coalition continues to keep its doors open for anyone fearing detention deportation. Obviously the politics and the realities have changed after the last presidential election. And I think the number of people who will be fleeing into sanctuary will probably be diminishing over the next few years as well. And I think that creates somewhat of a challenge for sanctuary coalitions that have perhaps created their identity around that very central idea of offering sanctuary to undocumented peoples. What are we going to do now, right? If this is not the thing we're organizing around, what are we going to do? And that goes back to my original point that sanctuary coalitions need to remember that they are working in the service of larger goals, which is migrant, immigrant, and refugee justice.

I now serve on the board of *Voces de la Frontera* here in Milwaukee, which is a statewide organization in Wisconsin. And I'm really happy to know that the Dane Sanctuary Coalition is a partner to *Voces de la Frontera* as is the New Sanctuary Moment here in Milwaukee. And I think that's the best way to move forward, right? To create these umbrella organizations that are working at a different pressure points: whether that's the workplace, whether that's in religious spaces, whether that's in organizing and marches. All of these different places that we can continue to raise consciousness not just among the immigrant community, which knows these issues better than anyone else, but just as importantly, among our allies in white and Black communities in places like Milwaukee and Wisconsin and across the Midwest. This is fundamentally important to a place like Wisconsin where Latinos will never be the majority of people living in the state. So it's incumbent that we continue to build coalitions with people who are perhaps from different walks of life, but who share that central mission of reforming the way in which we understand migrant justice in this country.

**AM:** And we actually do have one more question, but kind of related to what you're talking about. So how is the work that you do and the work of churches related to ideas of mutual aid and community support, especially considering the political core of mutual aid as it relates to ideas of abolition and working outside of the state? So how do the two feed off of each other and how can they also collaborate in the end?

**SG:** Yeah, well I think one of the important things that we remember, the importance of the Sanctuary Movement is to meet people where they are, right? So there's kind of like this natural way in which religious spaces offer kind of an incubator for social movements because you already have a group of people who are coming together under a shared idea. And so one is that's one of the things that I really appreciate about the Sanctuary Movement.

To your question of mutual aid. This goes back to the earlier question about the way in which the sacred can address the secular, right? When you cannot rely on the state to offer the support that you need. And this is a reality, of course, for undocumented communities, which, who have a very uneasy relationship with the state and its agents. One because they of course fear the power and the violence of the state and their ability to separate them from their communities here in the United States. But also the way in which the state does not provide a safety net for them in the way it does for citizens in the country, despite those individuals providing really important resources to the maintenance of the state. This idea that undocumented people pay taxes but never can actually benefit from the fruits of the state. And so when they don't have access to that, they have to turn to other places.

Mutual aid societies were kind of the norm for many immigrant communities in the early 20th century. There are fewer of those today, but there are kind of reborn ideas of mutuality. There are

new mutual aid societies have developed in light of the pandemic. And of course, faith spaces have always been spaces of mutual aid. It's a place where people give their money every Sunday and then expect something in return if they're ever in need because that's the way community should function. And so there are kind of these mechanisms in place that communities can turn to, and the Sanctuary Movement has since the 1980s looked at the Church in that same way of thinking of it as a piece of mutuality, as a place of accompaniment, as a place of fellowship.

**IC:** Awesome. Thank you so much, Dr. González. I really appreciated you talking to us about what you do and how you view the movement. I think that definitely hearing different perspectives on the movement, especially about different regions in which the movement is taking place is important to get a very holistic view of what the Sanctuary Movement is besides, like what you were saying, just sanctuary because it is so much more than that, and it does do so much more than that. So thank you again for sharing with us and yeah, thank you so much and have a good evening.