

Chosen Kin: How Relationships Sustained the 1980s Public Sanctuary Movement **Magdalena Escudero-Kane, Class of 2026**

This project examines the role of kinship in the origins, evolution, and legacy of the San Francisco Public Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. The Sanctuary Movement involved faith-based and community-led activism to protect migrants fleeing U.S.-backed political repression, civil war, and state-sponsored violence in Guatemala and El Salvador. Kinship—the networks of trust, mutual care, and shared responsibility—became the ethical and operational framework that enabled sanctuary activism to take root, grow, and adapt.

Drawing primarily on interviews from the Sanctuary Oral History Project, the research centers the voices of six women: Presbyterian Minister Marilyn Chilcote, Sisters Kathleen Healy, Maureen Hally, Bernadette Wombacher, laywomen Arlene Schaupp, and Eileen Purcell. These oral histories are contextualized with archival records, legislative histories, and contemporary accounts.

San Francisco's earliest sanctuary actions were the result of long-standing transnational, multid denominational, and institutional kinship networks. Salvadorian and Catholic organizations educated religious leaders in more than 65 churches, synagogues, and religious orders about the wars in Central America and the plight of asylum seekers. Institutional kinship between lay and clergy women spurred political action. Where strong institutional support was lacking, robust interdenominational kinship ties stepped in and created infrastructure within the Public Sanctuary Movement. The movement was also built on a legacy of sanctuary actions, from sheltering European refugees in the 1940s to aiding Vietnam-era war resisters and South American political refugees. These earlier efforts provided strategies, models, and moral precedents that guided congregations in declaring sanctuary for Central Americans. Decision-making was rooted in shared values, inclusive dialogue, and flexible solidarity, allowing for varying levels of participation while preserving relationships and community cohesion.

Ultimately, kinship—linking institutions, religious women, generations of activists, migrants, and allies—was the thread that held the sanctuary movement together. It provided both the rationale and means of action. Sanctuary was not improvised, but transmitted through webs of relational commitment, leaving behind a legacy and model that continues to influence migrant justice efforts today.

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References

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