

Moral Rightness & The Sanctuary Movement: The Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America 1982-1990

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This research examines the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America (CRTFCA), an organization formed to influence U.S. policy in Central America. As recent history, little scholarship exists on the organization and its influence as a resistance movement. The CRTFCA helped establish the national Sanctuary movement which aided the entry and transport of Guatemalan and Salvadoran refugees to churches across the country. Although they were without legal right, members granted political asylum to these refugees. This project mainly draws on primary sources accessible through the organization's archives. I argue that the Task Force created a moral space of legitimacy for an illegal activity. Their arguments were structured by three pillars: 1) the Bible and God as a higher law; 2) a historicized moral tradition of the Underground Railroad; and 3) an indictment of the U.S. government for crimes against humanity. This research demonstrates that the CRTFCA placed church and state into a confrontational dialogue about how religion and politics were interconnected in U.S. society and questioned the proper place of religion in a democratic society.

Methodology

I gathered information from a wide variety of resources including newspaper articles, meeting minutes, flyers and literature created and dispersed by the CRTFCA. With these materials, I was able to flesh out their central arguments.

"We are people of faith who believe that to know and worship God is to do justice and undertake acts of mercy."

Members of the Task Force defended their acts through Christian heritage, claiming they traced their faith to ancestors who were a people in exodus and exile.

"Modern-day 'Underground Railroad' gives sanctuary to new refugees."

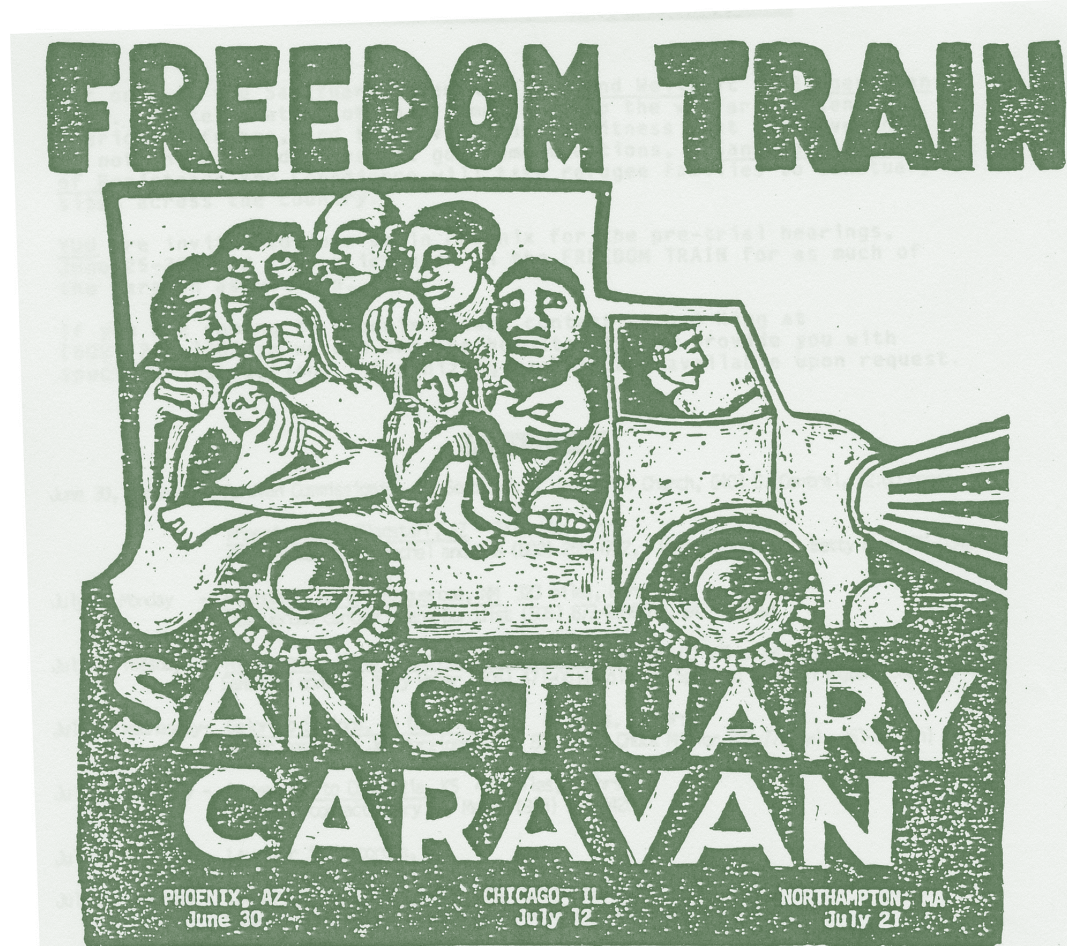
The idea for the movement was envisioned as a loose network of support or "safe houses" reminiscent of the Underground Railroad used before and during the Civil War.

Participants appropriated the language and imagery of the abolitionist underground railroad in an effort to give sanctuary historical legitimacy.

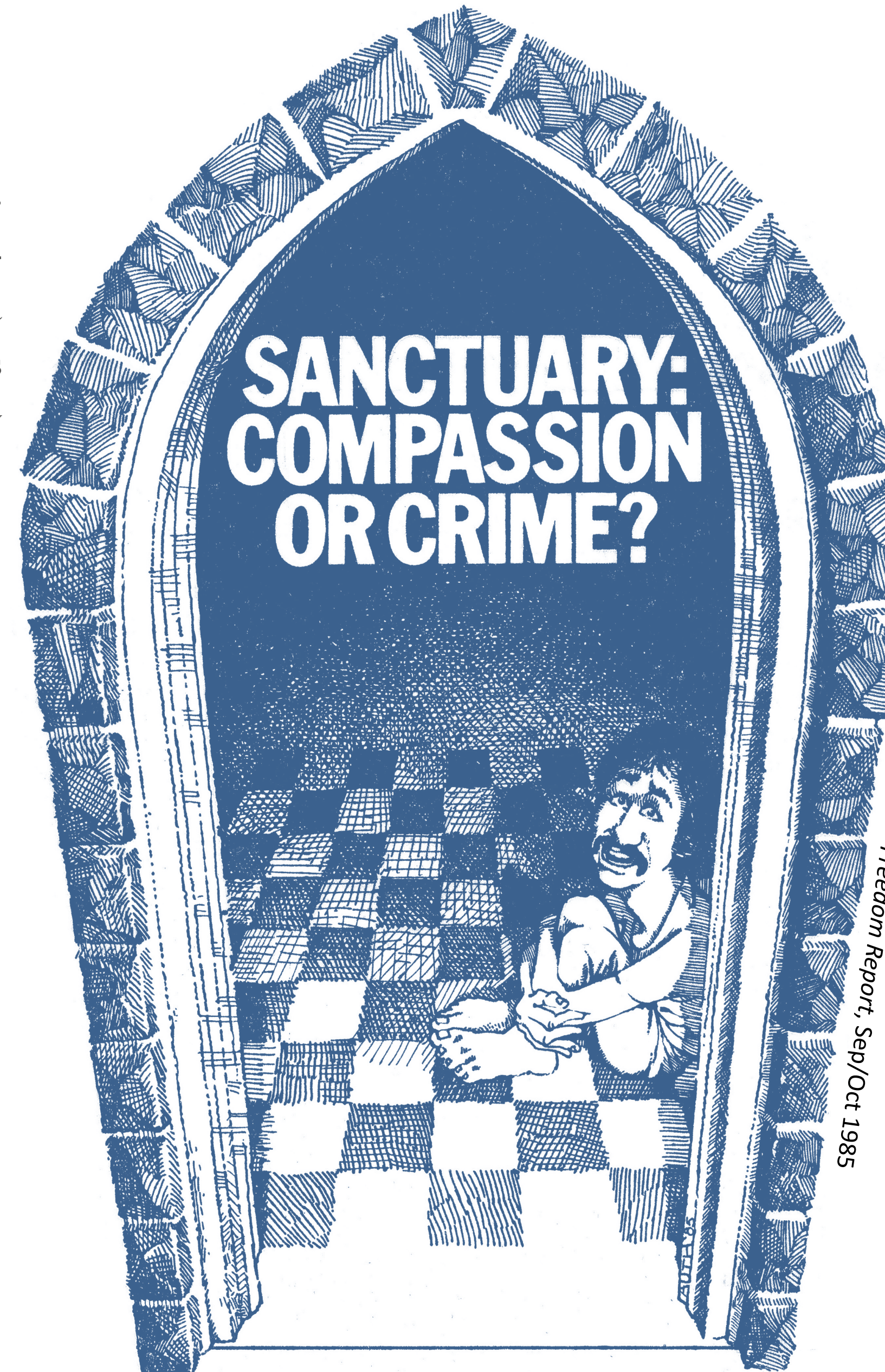


The CRTFCA cited Biblical passages for justification: *"If a stranger lives with you in your land, do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as your-self—for you*

were once strangers yourself in Egypt" (Leviticus). Participants also claimed the First Amendment guaranteed their right to exercise religion.



A flyer sent out regarding a sanctuary caravan of resistance and conscience. CRTFCA Archives



"I left my town for another to hide. My best friend was killed. They came looking for me where I used to live. At the same time, my brother was kidnapped and tortured."

Joachim Vasquez, Guatemalan Refugee
 Syracuse Herald-American, July 21, 1985

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This striking figure, representing self-determination in Central America, appeared on the cover of a Task Force sanctuary manual.

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"We indict the U.S. government for crimes against humanity."

"Crimes against humanity" was a phrase coined during the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi criminal defendants following WWII.

Invoking this idea allowed the CRTFCA to claim that they were implementing principles laid down at the Trials in which the U.S. was a signatory. Civil initiative, rooted in these principles, made citizens legally obligated to disobey inhumane governments.

"At Nuremberg...the U.S. government also established that everyone has the right to protect refugees." - Statement signed by sanctuary members.

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