



Sunday Forum - September 2025

Migrant Safety and Justice: Loving Every Person

Sept. 7 “The DUPC Protection Plan: Keeping All Safe”

Presenter: Grania Marcus, Justice Team member

The current administration has terminated the protections from immigration raids that churches used to enjoy. What would happen if Immigration and Customs Enforcement were to try to make entry into our buildings? How do we ensure that all who come here feel safe and secure? Grania Marcus will discuss how we are preparing to protect our church from a potential ICE raid, and how this work challenges us as people of faith.

Sept. 14 “Witnessing Migrations: Tales from an Eldest Daughter”

Presenter: Cassandra Bocanegra

Cassie is a senior manager with the Finger Lakes Region of the New York Immigration Coalition. She states, "Since I was born in Texas and had the privilege of being documented, I was taught to appreciate that privilege and use it to speak up when I saw injustices in my community. My family is mixed status and so I have had certain freedoms that others in my community did not, including the safety of using my voice." Come hear her experiences and stories growing up with immigration touching every part of her life.

Sept. 21 “Sanctuary at DUPC, 1984-86: A Marvelous Time”

Presenters: Gail Mott with Mauricio Morales, Mary Bookout, and Don Fairman

Gail Mott has spent a lifetime with social justice activism in many areas including immigrant rights. She along with the other presenters will describe how DUPC and other Rochester congregations joined together to provide sanctuary in the Institute Building, and how that kind of need continues. It was not an easy time, but Gail recalls it as a marvelous time. What can we learn from these veterans of the struggle? What is it like to take risks for justice and inclusivity?

Sept. 28 “Worker Justice Center of New York: Protecting the Most Vulnerable”

Presenters: Mary McConnell, Olivia Post-Rich, and Gabriel Marcano

In 2011 the non-profit Worker Justice Center was created when Farmworker Legal Service of NY and Workers' Rights Law Center merged. Today they have programs addressing human trafficking, workplace safety, and immigrant rights. Our guests will share about legal challenges to the for-profit Federal Detention Center in Batavia, and vigorous investigations of human Trafficking, What must change to prevent the dehumanization of those who are most at risk?

Sundays, 9:45 AM ~ The Shaw Room



Introduction of Sunday Forum, 9/21/2025

I have put down some thought about introducing our speakers – I have my two bits.

Today we welcome to the podium (figuratively) four respected elders. It's pretty cool that we can hear in one hour about the efforts made by Gail and Mary and Don "back then," as well as more recent experiences through Mauricio about how "the System" is working. We know that they are humble; but let me say also that we also know in our hearts that each of them provides some type of inspiration for us: on how we could use Christian ethics to make a positive difference.

They will speak about a very small period (in the scale of things), 1984-86. Ten years before that Downtown had incorporated through the merger of First, Central and Brick Churches. In 1979 (5 years previously) it had declared itself a More Light congregation, a church that welcomed the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer members of the world. It had not yet inserted itself into the politics and ethics of LGBTQ ordination in the PC(USA) – Janie Spahr had not yet appeared on the scene.

But in 1984, DUPC made a small, courageous effort to resist the callousness of the US government: to do something against injustice, to resist the suffering that was caused by powerful structures. DUPC did something to assert its Christian ethics concretely. We will hear how these esteemed ones remember those days. [How many here also lived through that period - on line, too? We should try to hear your recollections, if possible.]

But I am also reflecting on **why** it's important to hear these stories. Forty years ago, Gail and Don and Mary were "only middle-aged" (hard to believe!!?). Now, they like many of us are (mostly) within a few years of finishing their lives, our time together with them. But ... we and they are not done growing: we and they can still be role-models, we are still role-models whether we like it or not.

INSPIRATION. We are all in need of some **Inspiration** these days (something to motivate us to do more and to be more than survivors of the daily grind). We have some remaining responsibility not to be overcome by barriers – real and imagined barriers: barriers that suppress **Inspiration** / frustrate it. Those barriers result in Numbness and Cynicism, and there is too much of that in the world.

So I so look forward to hearing from them. They followed important role-models in their time. They (though humble and quiet) remain important as our sources of inspiration. With their models we can better hope to resist our private reasons to be numb or callous or cynical. Maybe we can then take opportunities to express our individual and collective uniqueness; to join in our innate connectedness; and to realize that we also have power to make a difference. It happened before; so it can happen again.

How DUPC became a Sanctuary Congregation and what happened: 1983-1986 - a Forum report to DUPC, September 21, 2025

To set the stage for what was about to unfold at DUPC here's a brief history of matters that concerned us in the 1980s:

In **February of 1980** Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote a letter to President Jimmy Carter - pleading that his administration stop sending military aid to the Salvadoran government. He wrote that "political power is in the hands of the unscrupulous military who only know how to repress the people and promote the interests of the Salvadoran oligarchy." The Carter administration did not respond and ultimately provided more than \$10 million in military aid.

"Be a patriot. Kill a priest!" was the right-wing slogan during El Salvador's civil war.

On **March 20, 1980**, while he was saying Mass, Archbishop Romero was assassinated by a Salvadoran officer who had been trained at the US Army School of the Americas - the SOA.

"On **December 2, 1980**, four North American churchwomen were raped and murdered by five members of the National Guard - also trained at the SOA.

In **1982** Ronald Reagan became President. He increased money for the military to \$1.5 million/day - plus sending in US military advisors.

This was the time of the Cold War. All across Central America civil wars were raging. Here is a helpful quote from the Cambridge University Press: **28 September 2010:**

"The strategic stalemate that prevented a direct military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union displaced violent superpower competition to areas of the Third World where the two blocs could invest in local and regional wars without risking direct confrontation. "

Back in Rochester, Alison Clarke, a joy-filled prophet and member of DUPC's ACCT Council (Action of Church and Community Together) let us know that families who were fleeing for their

lives from El Salvador, Haiti and Guatemala were being denied entry into the US . Why? Because our government was supporting their armies - armies that were intimidating, imprisoning and massacring their own citizens. Alison urged us to become a Sanctuary congregation.

We wanted to learn more, so DUPC invited Rev. John Fife, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, to help us understand what would be involved in our becoming a sanctuary congregation. He had helped start the Sanctuary Movement after his church had failed in its attempt to resolve the problems of political refugees through the courts. He told us that the US government considered granting sanctuary to be illegal, that there could be fines of up to \$5000 - plus five-year jail sentences. Then he paused, looked at all of us, and said: But this is nothing compared to the IMMENSE suffering of these people, who are fleeing for their lives.

Thus DUPC began an intensive study of the legal and moral aspects of sanctuary. Fr. Jim Callan of Corpus Christi Church said that if one other congregation would join them we could work together. After nine months Session voted overwhelmingly in favor - and in 1984 the Rochester Sanctuary Coalition was born!

Later Temple B'rith Kodesh, Lake Avenue Baptist Church, The House Church, and the Religious Society of Friends/Quakers joined us in a covenantal relationship. Eleven other congregations became supporters.

In June of 1984 we all celebrated the arrival of Alejandro and Letitia Gomez, four children and their grandmother, Lucila, from El Salvador, with a service of welcome. The family took up residence in the third floor apartment of the Insitute Building.

In San Salvador, Leticia had a daily radio program for children. Alejandro had been a union leader. He was imprisoned and

tortured for trying to form a bus union (and told us that his most unbearable torture was hearing terrified cries of the children). He spoke compellingly to many Rochester audiences about the repressive Salvadoran government and US complicity. Without the \$1.5 million each day from the US, that brutal regime could not have existed.

For about six months their lives went on smoothly.

Then, in **January of 1985**, as part of a national sweep by government officials, Alejandro and Letitia, who were on their way to English lessons, were surrounded by INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) plainclothesmen, arrested, and taken to the Federal Building, where bail was set at \$3,000 cash. Banks had closed but supporters filled the Federal Building and kept a vigil until the money was raised and they were released.

At that time the Gomez family applied for asylum and their hearing was scheduled for **June, 1985**. But that date was postponed. In Tucson the trial of John Fife and 15 other sanctuary workers was underway. The Los Angeles Times wrote: "A federal grand jury in Arizona, cracking down on the growing Central American sanctuary movement, has indicted 16 persons - including three nuns, two priests and a minister- on charges of smuggling refugees into the United States.

"Government sources here said that the indictment was handed down in Phoenix last Thursday but sealed until Monday so that INS agents in several cities could arrest 65 refugees and hold them as material witnesses."

Leticia and Alejandro were two of those subpoenaed as witnesses for the government. In December, after their testimony, the government declared them to be hostile witnesses. Why? They had not answered a simple Yes or No but had attempted to explain to the jury why they had been forced to leave El Salvador.

Their asylum hearing was rescheduled and postponed several times. Finally it was scheduled for **June 4, 1986**. Maggie Catillez, their immigration lawyer, had all in readiness: Documentation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Red Cross; testimony from Alejandro and Leticia; petitions from thousands of supporters, attesting that Alejandro Gomez was, indeed, a political refugee.

Twelve days before their asylum hearing, on the Friday before Memorial Day, **May 23, 1986**, at 4:30 PM, Alejandro and Leticia were walking down Main street on their way back to DUPC after an appointment with their attorney. Suddenly a man pushed his way between them and, turning to Alejandro, said, "How are you, Alejandro?" Instantly Alejandro was surrounded by ten plainclothesmen and thrust into one of four long black limousines waiting at the curb. Leticia was left standing there, stunned, and wondering whether she was in the US or back in El Salvador. Three frantic hours went by before she learned that Alejandro had been taken to Buffalo in a convoy and re-arrested by the INS. They claimed to have information which would prove him a threat to national security. (Later Alejandro reported having been handcuffed with his arms behind him on the hour-long trip to Buffalo, strip-searched, and taunted.) Bail had been set at \$50,000 cash. By that time all banks were closed. It was the beginning of Memorial Day weekend. Telephones started ringing. At a prayer service at DUPC that night people pledged \$10,000. On Saturday morning there was a prayer service at Corpus Christi Church. Word was spreading. Then an extraordinary thing happened. People began lining up outside DUPC with their money - from children with piggybanks to people who simply wanted to help - some gave big checks to grocery stores for cash. Synagogues and churches with Saturday services gave their collections as long-term loans. All day a warm, spontaneous outpouring of love continued; and by six o'clock the miracle had happened. \$50,000 in cash. A jubilant car caravan drove to the

Immigration Center at the Peace Bridge in Buffalo. Officials there were punitive and rude, using delaying tactics and muttering that if they had their way they'd take out the whole family and shoot them. Finally, at one o'clock on Sunday morning, Alejandro was released.

We all wondered if the timing of the arrest was coincidental or if, in fact, it had a great deal to do with the fact that on that following Tuesday the Rochester City Council was scheduled to vote on Rochester becoming "City of Sanctuaries". That night the City Hall chamber was packed. Passing the resolution would be understood as an expression of deep concern about US involvement in El Salvador and the policies of the INS. **The District Director of the INS, who already had met several times with the City Council and threatened them with a cut-off of federal funds,** stood up and this time threatened to bring action against Rochester sanctuary workers if the resolution passed. The vote was 6-2 in favor, with one abstention.

The Gomez' June 4 asylum hearing went on for three days and was adjourned until August. Meanwhile, the family had become aware of increasing surveillance and they were afraid - especially for their four children. Volunteers had been driving them to and from school, accompanying them every step of the way. Their church home became a veritable prison. They hardly dared to go out together. But one beautiful late June day grandmother Lucila, all four children and I went strawberry picking and came back with 10 brimming quarts which we put on their kitchen table.

At 11:30 that night our telephone rang, and Carol Thiel, a representative from Corpus Christi, asked if I could meet her car outside our house in 10 minutes. Peter and I knew it had to be about the Gomez family. We waited in trepidation. All she could tell us was that the family had fled to Canada, already were in Fort Erie, and that we were to call a certain number from a "safe" telephone. So we drove around trying to find a house with the

lights still on at midnight. When we were connected Alejandro came to the phone to tell us that he hadn't wanted to jeopardize anyone on the Sanctuary Committee by involving us in his "flight;" but that he knew he would never again be safe in Rochester, and so he decided to cross the border and ask for asylum in Canada; that he had thought it best not to tell his family in advance. While we had been strawberry picking he and Leticia had been getting ready. When they left the church, with nothing but essential documents in Leticia's pocketbook, the children thought they were going to a Birthday party.

That Sunday six representatives from the Declaring Congregations gathered at noon and we listened in silence - with feelings of relief for their safety but great sadness for our loss - as Sr. Kathy Weider of Corpus Christi read this letter from Alejandro:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters. It hasn't been easy for me to make this decision...Never has anyone penetrated my heart in the way that you have. I love all of you equally and it was very difficult leaving you without saying good-bye. May God bless you for all the good that is in your hearts. I love you all." He then went on to say that the precarious conditions of his existence had been destroying the lives of his children bit by bit and that "their lives do not belong to me...I can decide about my own life but not about the lives of my children. I was sure that I would have been deported, along with my wife, my mother-in-law and my children, whom I have caused to live in fear."

All of us felt dazed. It was particularly sobering to recognize that the entire Gomez family most likely would have been denied asylum and sent back to El Salvador. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees, 97% of Salvadorans who applied for political asylum between 1983 and 1986 were rejected. But it was hard to adjust to the fact that the Gomez family, whom we had grown to love, had left forever. Two weeks passed before we realized we should gather up their belongings and take

them to Fort Erie. But our sadness on entering that hot and empty apartment turned to laughter when we walked into the kitchen. There on the table were 10 quarts of caved-in strawberries; and there on the floor was a large pool of strawberry juice with a family of little cucarachas swimming about in delight.

In declaring Sanctuary DUPC and the other declaring congregations had put the law of God above the law of the government, putting into action the words of Archbishop Tutu, who asserted that "in situations of oppression there is no neutral ground." In the process new and lasting friendships had been forged among our faith communities.

By the mid 1980s over 500 houses of worship across the country had joined what historian Kristina Shull has called "**the largest mass mobilization of civil disobedience against detention and deportation in US history.**"

I'm happy to report that Alejandro and Leticia are still living in Ft. Erie, Ontario with their children and grandchildren (who adore Alejandro) nearby. They are all Canadian citizens.