

# Churches will continue to give sanctuary

## Leaders snub Sgro's advice on turning out refugees

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Local church leaders said Monday they intend to keep providing sanctuary to beleaguered refugees despite comments by Citizenship and Immigration Minister Judy Sgro favouring an end to the centuries-old practice.

Sgro told The Canadian Press she plans to urge churches not to provide a safe space for newcomers fighting for refugee status, calling it a "back door to enter Canada."

Church leaders said they see their offers of refuge quite differently.

"The church is always concerned for the powerless," said Archdeacon John Privett of the Anglican diocese. "The tradition of sanctuary in the church is a long established visible sign of the sanctity of holy space."

"It provides a breathing space," said Father Jack Gallagher, president of the Newman Theological College. "It gives the person some sense they're not alone."

Their comments were echoed by church leaders across the country.

Rev. Jim Sinclair, general secretary of the general council of the United Church of Canada, said the long-standing church practice of granting asylum-seekers refuge is "something of a shock absorber or a safety valve when there's been a breakdown in the system."

Fleeing to sacred ground does not provide legal protection for the refugee, but it often makes the government take a second look at a case.

"It's public relations," said Shirish Chotalia, a private immigration lawyer. "You don't want to drag someone kicking and screaming out of a church."

The problem, Chotalia said, is when some claimants abuse the safe haven of a church as a stall tactic.

"We wouldn't want certain individuals using or abusing church sanctuary as a means to stay in Canada illegally," she said. "On the other hand, I'd hate to

see the churches lose their role in being able to assist people in need."

Gallagher suggested churches that help illegal residents who have been deemed dangerous should be sued by the government.

"I don't think the church would be justified in giving someone refuge who by society's norms is a criminal," he said.

Gallagher, Privett and Chotalia all agreed the refugee system is in disarray.

At issue, say critics, is the absence in the refugee determination process of a so-called "merit-based" appeal, where new evidence can be introduced.

Only technical questions involving procedure can now be taken up with the Federal Court of Canada, said University of Toronto law professor Audrey Macklin. Those who win appeals must then go back to the refugee panel and start from scratch, she said.

The most recent sanctuary case saw police enter a Quebec City church in March to remove and deport an Algerian refugee claimant who had been holed up there since February.

Edmonton had its own high-profile case in 1999 when Leticia Cables spent five months living in St. Anthony's Catholic Church to fight deportation.

Cables eventually returned to her native Philippines, but she and her family were granted landed immigrant status earlier this year and are now living in Edmonton.

Three churches in Montreal are now harbouring roughly a dozen people, including four Palestinians, an Ethiopian family and a Colombian family. An Ottawa church is providing sanctuary to a Bangladeshi; and a Nigerian woman and her daughters are holed up in a Calgary church.

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■ Sgro calls for limits  
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