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Journal

Peace Review, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

ISSN

1040-2659

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.1080/10402659.2024.2440879

Peer reviewed



Peace Review
A Journal of Social Justice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cper20

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To cite this article: Amy Argenal & Tay Villaseñor (10 Jan 2025): The Legacy of Sanctuary: The Movement to End Immigration Detention in California Through Interfaith Organizing, Peace Review, DOI: [10.1080/10402659.2024.2440879](https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2024.2440879)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2024.2440879>



Published online: 10 Jan 2025.



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The Legacy of Sanctuary: The Movement to End Immigration Detention in California Through Interfaith Organizing

AMY ARGENAL  AND TAY VILLASEÑOR

This essay pulls data from a larger research project exploring the tactics of interfaith organizing to end immigration detention and deportation in the state of California, utilizing a long-term participatory methodology named as activist accompaniment as research (Arriaga-Hernandez and Argenal 2022). The research shares how one organization, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, is investing in a long-term movement to shut down detention facilities in the state, and walk with families impacted by deportation. Utilizing abolition as a theoretical frame, the research pulls themes to demonstrate how the organization is not only looking at protection from harmful immigration systems, but also the abolition of specific structures of harm and how communities can heal and move forward in new ways. This essay focuses on one key tactic, that of pilgrimage.

INTRODUCTION

It was during the Covid-19 pandemic when prison transfers were ravaging both state penitentiaries, as well as detention centers with Covid-19, that communities in the Bay Area of California started to hear about the horrific conditions inside state penitentiaries and immigration detention facilities. It was thanks to the brave work of folks like Jose Ruben Hernandez and other spiritual residents (organizers with the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity) who took risks to share the conditions of what they were experiencing. Inside the prisons and detention facilities, there were no masks or sanitizing gels, no room to socially distance, there was the common practice of using solitary confinement as a way to isolate, and people were sick, including guards yet continuing to spread the disease as well as transferring the disease between facilities. It was in

response to this, that Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, in collaboration with other organizations fighting against mass incarceration held a vigil in front of San Quentin state prison. It was a beautiful event in an awful place. For many of us, it was one of the first times people had gathered publicly since the start of the pandemic and there was a desperate need of a community space to express the deep anger at the failure of our government and institutions to protect those most vulnerable inside. The memory is vivid, of the signs, the speeches of faith leaders, and family members, and one sign in particular inspired deeper questioning of the role of abolition in this “new sanctuary” movement, “Free them all”. This sign, grounded in abolitionist thinking and one so needed within the immigrant rights movement was a statement declaring that we will not allow our policies to separate out the “good” immigrant to only provide relief and justice for some. It was a sign that pushed “sanctuary” to mean more, to expand to include more.

This essay pulls data from a larger research project exploring the tactics of interfaith organizing to end immigration detention and deportation in the state of California, utilizing a long-term participatory methodology named activist accompaniment as research (Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal 2022). The research asks:

- How are immigrant rights organizations using vigils and other performative and spiritual practices to advocate for a more beloved community?
- What is the role of faith communities and the use of spiritual scripts in advocating for immigrant rights in the Bay Area?
- What does sanctuary look like, what are the demands being made for a more beloved community in regards to immigrant justice? And in particular how is this work happening, while also building that beloved community within?

The research shares how one organization, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, is investing in a long-term movement to shut down detention facilities in the state, and walk with families impacted by deportation. Utilizing abolition as a theoretical frame, the research pulls themes to demonstrate how the organization is not only looking at protection from harmful immigration systems, but also the abolition of specific structures of harm and how communities can heal and move forward in new ways. This essay focuses on one key tactic, that of pilgrimage.

THE SANCTUARY MOVEMENT

The Sanctuary Movement traces back to the 1980s when many Central Americans who were fleeing violent military regimes faced harsh and restrictive immigration policies under the Regan Administration, in particular denials of asylum claims, and deportations. The Sanctuary Movement shined the light on levels of fear and uncertainties as well as the impacts of family separation on the immigrant community. In many cities and even states, this movement led to clear policies that prohibit the cooperation of local authorities with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The Sanctuary Movement was also able to highlight the fear, as well as start to shift the narrative around immigration policies. The Sanctuary Movement was led by faith communities all across the country who believed it was the church's call to walk alongside refugee and immigrant communities (Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky 2009). Since the 1980s, faith groups have continued to push for more humane immigration policies. One such group, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, led a monthly vigil for years in front of the Richmond Detention Center, highlighting the pain and injustices of immigration detention. The vigils would last one hour, and normally, there would be about 20–30 people, there to offer their presence and their noise at the end of the hour.

In 2018, under the Trump Administration, and with the media sharing the policy of family separation at the US Border, the monthly vigil swelled to almost 1000 at one point. What had been a small group of folks connected through their churches and places of faith, had transformed to a site of activism, resistance to the Trump administration, and demands for immigration reform. Signs transformed from calls of welcoming and faith to insults toward the Trump Administration. Yet the vigil still remained, communities came out together.

The Richmond Detention Center eventually ended all immigration detention, in 2018 and the 200 people were sent to different detention facilities (Hernández 2018). The vigils moved to the ICE offices in downtown San Francisco, where monthly 20–30 people continued to highlight the plight of immigration detention. When Covid-19 hit, the protest changed. The vigils moved to San Quentin and a coalition of racial justice and immigrant rights groups merged to demand “free them all” (Simmons 2020). The dangers that immigrants were facing were also the dangers that incarcerated folks faced too. There was a pull of faith groups to include those incarcerated into that community and recognize the intersections of violence through incarceration, whether from the criminal justice system or immigration detention, and often times both.

IMMIGRATION DETENTION

Immigration detention is an “inhumane and unnecessary practice of holding immigrants in civil detention while they await a determination of their immigration status or potential deportation” (The ACLU of Northern California 2024). As of 2024, California holds the third-largest immigration detention population in the United States. The state operates six Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers to include: Adelanto ICE Processing Center, Desert View Annex, Golden State Annex, Imperial Regional Detention Facility, Mesa Verde ICE Processing Center and Otay Mesa Detention Center. These facilities are managed by for-profit prison companies to include GEO Group and CoreCivic. The companies profit off millions of dollars a year by producing a dehumanizing, capitalist system that warehouses immigrant bodies in inhumane facilities (Long, 2015; Luan, 2018; Martinez 2020). These detention centers have documented reports of unsanitary conditions and limited oversight which perpetuates physical and sexual abuse, medical neglect, and human suffering.

García Hernández (2019) critiques California’s immigration detention system by exploring the contradictions of its role as a “sanctuary” state. In 2017, the California Values Act (SB 54) was passed to create legislation on how the state, in theory, should limit cooperation with ICE personnel and provide sanctuary and protection for immigrant communities (California Immigrant Policy Center 2021). However, California defies this bill by allowing local governments to use Intergovernmental Service Agreements (IGSAs) with ICE to operate these cruel detention centers (California Department of Justice 2019). As a sanctuary state, California must stop masquerading as a state of protection and actually delineate from these processes. Saadi et al. (2020) provides insight into the horrors of these facilities which describe intentional practices of continuous lighting causing sleep deprivation for detainees, overcrowded and dirty living spaces and insecurity of food and medical resources. Detained immigrants suffer severe deterioration to their mental and physical health while battling lack of adequate legal representation to support their cases, which leads to high rates of deportation. The conditions in which immigrant detention exists in California challenge the reputation the state embraces as a progressive sanctuary state (Levin 2017).

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS MOVEMENTS AND ABOLITION

Abolition is a pathway to successfully attack these root structures of violence and dehumanization of immigrant communities. It is an act

that seeks to cease a practice or system, which historically sought to dismantle the practices of slavery. Angela Davis is one of the most well-known voices in the abolition movement, and her work has contributed to the immigrant rights and detention conversation by arguing that sanctuary should not be a place of safety from deportation but a part of an abolitionist framework that seeks an end to all detention and incarceration. Angela Davis (2005) links these movements of sanctuary with present day efforts toward prison abolition by addressing particularly the detention centers for immigrants. She supports that any abolitionist movement needs to be directed at the roots of incarceration and immigration detention by applying systemic practices to combat inequity, most especially race and class-based ones.

Abolition of immigration detention centers has gained much more significance in recent scholarship. They are seen to be an extension of the prison industrial complex and affect communities disproportionately. Immigration enforcement is interconnected with criminal law enforcement, creating this "cimmigration" system that needs abolitionist approaches to take down. According to Stumpf (2006), the reform that needs to be addressed is the breaking of that power and structural relationship between immigration and criminal law enforcement, rather than creating cycles of mass incarceration. Shah's (2024) book calls for exactly this in their work documenting the history around private detention facilities, the movements against them, and the most recent calls to "abolish ICE".

The immigrant rights movement and sanctuary initiatives of California are deeply part of the larger fight for justice, especially when demonizing policies seeks to attack cities and states that consider themselves a place for sanctuary. While there has been a great deal of activism on the issue, there is generally an absence of scholarship focused on contemporary sanctuary movements in California. More studies are needed to illustrate how grassroots movements challenge these harmful systems and center on abolition to dismantle the social injustices of the immigration detention system.

MOVEMENTS AGAINST DETENTION

There has been significant activism to attack these unjust systems of power to mobilize collectively and pressure the dismantling of immigrant detention. The Detention Watch Network has been doing this work at a national scale, including launching the Dignity not Detention campaign back in 2010 (Piper 2010). In California, many organizations have stepped into this campaign and have made some legislative gains. One huge win was Senate Bill 29, the Dignity not Detention Act (2017), which

basically froze the growth of for profit prisons. Assembly Bill 32 (2019) attempted to eliminate for-profit detention centers in California and passed, however the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that federal authority supersedes state law (Eisen 2022). Assembly Bill 937- the Vision Act (2021), was another huge disappointment as it would have ended ICE transfers for people leaving state penitentiaries, but it fell three votes short of the assembly. Community organizers slightly reformed the bill to push for Assembly Bill 1306, The Home Act, which would have ended ICE transfers for people who already qualified for criminal justice reform early release programs, however, Governor Newsome vetoed it in 2023 (Lempres 2023). Despite these disappointments, the fight continues through advocacy efforts of grassroots organizations, and the continued work to highlight the harm of private detention facilities on immigrant communities.

INTERFAITH MOVEMENT FOR HUMAN INTEGRITY

Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity commonly known as IM4HI, is a nonprofit organization working through values of spirituality and social justice in California since the 1990s. Much of the work of IM4HI sits at the intersection of mass incarceration and immigrant justice to advocate for a world where “all people are sacred across bars and borders”. They mobilize strategies on issues such as immigration and mass incarceration, to bring people of faith together in solidarity and work in coalitions to provide support, love and strength in marginalized spaces across California. It is in these values that inspired this project exploring the role of interfaith organizing with abolitionist desires and dreams. Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity utilizes accompaniment and “pilgrimage” as two key strategies of sanctuary, walking with families that have migrated and are settling in California, walking with families that have been impacted by immigration detention, and accompanying both faith communities in solidarity with impacted communities to visit places of harm, like the U.S./Mexico border and immigration detention facilities, through “pilgrimage”.

ACTIVIST ACCOMPANIMENT AS RESEARCH

This article pulls from a long term, participatory case study utilizing activist accompaniment as methodology. Expanding on Abrego’s

(2024) use of research as accompaniment, activist accompaniment as methodology “is a continued form of accompaniment” in which scholars name their emotional, political and investigate work as grounded in relationships with communities and advocating for policy changes through the research process (Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal 2022, p. 159).

The project began in the early summer of 2022, with a small team participating in the first state pilgrimage with Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity visiting detention facilities throughout the state, and continued with on-going participatory observations over the next two years as well attending other events and strategy sessions with the organization. In activist accompaniment, there is no definite end line, stressing strong relationship building with communities, however, this chapter will speak to research between 2022 and 2024.

The authors have had the privilege to meet and advocate alongside Interfaith for Human Integrity organizers in pilgrimage for a number of years. I (Amy) actually became acquainted with their work in 2015, during the root causes of migration pilgrimage to Central America. We have been able to participate in the Pilgrimage for a Better Future in 2022, and followed virtually the last few pilgrimages, Pilgrimage to Heal our Communities in 2023, and Pilgrimage to End Detention: A journey toward freedom this year (2024). These pilgrimages have been spaces that pull a wide, diverse group of people together to advocate for a more beloved community, including pushing for the HOME Act (mentioned above) and advocating for more funding to communities transitioning from centers of incarceration to caring economics through the HEAL funding (Healthy Economies Adapted to Last).

This particular article highlights key themes observed over the two-year period demonstrating how pivotal the work of sanctuary remains and how it has evolved toward an inclusive, liberatory movement, centering the needs of all in the community to combat systems and structures of violence and move toward peace. This research explores the violent impacts of immigration detention, and the use of vigils and other spiritual practices in combatting the system of immigration detention.

PILGRIMAGE TO END DETENTION, TO HEAL AND FOR BETTER FUTURES

In 2022, IM4HI held their first (of three to date) spiritual pilgrimage aimed at healing communities impacted by the inhumane processes of the US immigration detention system. The participants visited the six

remaining immigration detention centers in California. Along the journey, attendees were witnesses to the sacred land; reflecting on histories of settler colonialism of Indigenous people, and gathered collectively in prayer, reflection and dialogue, listening to the testimonios of recently released migrant detainees who revealed their lived experiences within these facilities. At many of the stops, phone calls from the inside of the facilities were amplified with a bullhorn to the pilgrims on the outside. Since 2022, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity has held three more annual pilgrimages visiting sites of detention, as well as the U.S./Mexico border.

The impact of these journeys was to demand for the closure and removal of these dehumanizing establishments and the release of all detainees. Executive director, Reverend Deborah Lee and activist and former immigrant detainee José Rubén (who played a leadership role in 2023 and 2024) lead this movement with passion and tenacity. Utilizing social media allowed IM4HI to document the pilgrimage and draw attention virtually, making an impact throughout the state, the nation and across the world. Residents surrounding the centers would share the impact of the prisons and formerly detained migrants would amplify their voices to highlight the detriments of immigrant detention.

A BELOVED COMMUNITY

Through a spiritual practice of pilgrimage, IM4HI's key objective around systems change, was impactful in a number of ways on the community. However, to do the deep work of abolition, it is not only the systems that must be transformed but how each and every one of us lives under those systems. The practice of pilgrimage embodied by IM4HI, created space for personal as well as structural transformation. This section will speak to three key observations during pilgrimage, the centering of impacted communities as leaders in the movement, shifting of narratives around the "good" immigrant, and pushing for closure with a vision of what comes after.

A core practice demonstrated throughout the pilgrimages was following the leadership of those with direct experience and those most impacted by detention and deportation. This is apparent in the space the organization has made for those with direct experiences, like activist in residence, freedom campaigns, and the large number of participants in the pilgrimage who were themselves impacted by immigration systems. The most recent pilgrimage had almost half of those participating with direct experience. A key example of this is the work of Jose Ruben, who now serves as a spiritual resident at IM4HI. Jose Ruben was formerly detained

and has been a huge advocate. He has been bridging the voices of those currently detained to the larger community, and building relationships to advocate for those who have deportation orders, as well as those currently detained and fighting against the horrific conditions on the inside.

Through these relationships between faith communities, activists and those impacted, IM4HI is able to shift the narrative around who deserves protection. IM4HI does not shy away from support for a community member that has a record, or has been incarcerated. On the contrary, they model radical inclusion, and through pilgrimage, allow others to develop relationships that help to challenge the stigma society often places on those previously incarcerated. A number of the freedom campaigns (campaigns led, often by the person themselves, to work against their deportation order) include calls for pardons from the governor for crimes committed in the past. The organization works through the messiness by creating spaces for people to be together, to walk together, and actually build relationships with one another in advocacy work. Pilgrimage was an opportunity, for community, to journey together, in the same buses, through sharing of meals, and rooms throughout the trip.

Demanding closure of immigrant detention facilities is one demand, but the pushback often comes in asking what comes next. On the first pilgrimage in 2022, the group met with communities in the Central Valley around what visions they had for next steps. The state will often claim that these detention facilities provide jobs for the community, however, many who live in the vicinity of these centers, claim that these jobs are low paid, and demeaning. They also share that funds could be used instead to provide for a caring economy, schools, childcare and health clinics. This is what the HEAL (healthy economies adapting to last) budget initiative calls for, incentivizing cities to divest by offering funding to build new industries and jobs. Through the pilgrimage, the participants were able to hear the visions and dreams from those not only detained, but their family members, and the communities with which these detention centers rely on. It is important that visions for the future come, not just from policy makers, but from the community themselves. Pilgrimage created space for that dreaming.

CONCLUSION

None of this work is easy, to imagine what our world can be without the borders of walls and incarceration are extremely difficult, yet bringing people together to imagine how to dismantle these systems is a big part of this work. The problem is how to bring communities together?

We are living in an extremely divided society, in which hearing something, whether an experience or idea that doesn't fit within our frames is very difficult. Yet, this is the work of abolition. It is imagining what could be, as we have never seen it before, and this imagining must be done in diverse communities with diverse experiences. This is what it means to create the beloved community. The work of IM4HI is not without tensions and conflict, however it is with constant care of who is included, centered and held, putting those most at risk at the core, and allowing us all to dream of what comes after.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

FUNDING

This work was part of the USF Interfaith Nonviolence Initiative, academic years 2022–2024, supported by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

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