

La Opinion Article – English Version translated by Vilma Levy

St. Luke's Episcopal Church of Long Beach becomes Sanctuary for Honduran Immigrant

St. Luke's Church is not the only one in the county of Los Angeles, there are three more churches from different denominations that keep three immigrants under refuge. St. Luke's is the only Episcopal Church in the Los Angeles Episcopal Diocese, currently housing someone

Alejandro Antonio Burgos Mejia (Alex) has found a home in Long Beach after eight months of being in custody at the Adelanto Immigration Detention Center. "I left Adelanto on December 14. Thanks to God, the Episcopal Church gave me refuge. They responded for me, to the Immigration authorities, and are my sponsors for lack of family. They give me housing, food, and unconditional support," says this 28 year-old immigrant from Honduras.

Alex escaped from Honduras in June, 2016 along with his wife and three children under the age of six. "We left because of the Mara Salvatrucha gang. If you do not cooperate with them, they take your life. Because I did not want to work with them, I received some help from friends to escape with my family. I was very sad to know that about 15 days after I left, a friend of mine who had helped us escaped had been killed," he says.

On his journey to the US he spent 11 months in Mexico. "There my wife and I had difficulties and we separated. She managed to move to the US with the children. The only thing I know is that they are in North Carolina. I have not seen my children for a year." In May, 2017 Alex crossed the southern border by climbing over the fence. As soon as he fell on the US side, he was stopped by Border Patrol agents. "They took me to a detention center in Otay Mesa, and then to Adelanto, where I was for eight months."

When he was in Adelanto, he connected with the organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras (People without Borders) which in turn connected him with the Los Angeles Episcopal Diocese. The Rev. Nancy Frausto was contacted as she serves in the diocesan sanctuary taskforce. From there St. Luke's became involved. Alex was given a bail of \$9,000 that was paid with donations made to the Episcopal church, the organization of People without Borders, and CLUE (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice). Also, to release him, they put an electronic monitoring bracelet on his ankle. The church is working closely with Alex's pro bono attorney to advise him in his political asylum process. "I have been told that it is possible that in April, they can give me permission to work," he says.

His asylum hearing will not be until December of 2018. Alex feels blessed and very happy. His goals on achieving political asylum are to work and be a part of an organization to support more people. "The most beautiful thing would be for me to become reunited with my children," he confesses. Until this happens, he maintains that he has found in St. Luke's Church, the family that he has always dreamed of. He is happy,

because at the end of January he began to study English. “I would like to attend a university and become an electrician or a doctor for children”, he says.

Rev. Nancy Frausto of St. Luke’s is a spiritual adviser to Alex. In January of 2017 a resolution was passed for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles to become a Sanctuary for Immigrants. “Each parish has to make a decision on how they are going to put it into practice,” she explained. When the news reached them that Alex Burgos was in Adelanto and asked for asylum, St. Luke’s Church did everything possible to prepare a space, and find organizations to support him. “A single parish can no do it alone, we needed allies,” she observes. “Unfortunately, there is a whole process and policies to be followed before putting Sanctuary into force,” she said. “We can only house one person at a time. If Alex Burgos receives political asylum he will be able to find a job and an apartment, our space will then be ready to shelter another person seeking refuge in the parish. Alex has won the hearts of many people. Many have adopted him in their own way. If he wants to stay in Long Beach, he already has family for his entire life. He’s a very good person, always ready to help in whatever is needed. He has suffered things that no one should suffer. And, that has not taken away his smile or his hope and faith,” says Rev. Frausto.

Pastor Guillermo Torres, coordinator of the Migratory Campaigns Organization (which brings together Methodist, Episcopal, and some evangelical churches, says that at present three churches in the country of Los Angeles serve as sanctuary for immigrants, who have no one to answer for them.) “We have 25 churches committed to physically serving as a precise sanctuary. The reason why we have converted our churches into sanctuaries is because of our faith. Racism has destroyed so many families and caused so much pain that we want to help, not to cause more emotional damage. To give them Sanctuary means to walk the entire legal process with them, to give them food, shelter, and connect them with medical and mental services.” he emphasizes.