Where have we been? To explore that question, I would like to begin over 500 years ago with the perspective of Dr. Gary MacEoin, a former correspondent with the National Catholic Reporter and a treasured colleague in the Sanctuary Movement.

“Five centuries ago Europe broke out of its ... encirclement by Islam when Columbus’s search for a new route to India was blocked by a continent. It was the start of a process, ... a devastating development for parts of what we call the Third World.

The first stage involved two elements: the destruction of the Aztec, Mayan, and Inca cultures and the annihilation of 90% of the estimated 70 million inhabitants of the American continent, and a parallel exploitation of the continent’s riches. Records in Spain’s Archives of the Indies list 185,000 metric tons of Gold and 16 million metric tons of silver unloaded at the Spanish port of San Lucas de Barrameda between 1503 and 1660 ...”

From the beginning of this process the church has played a vital role in blessing and justifying the European conquest. Already in 1493, Pope Alexander VI beginning with the theological assumption that the pope was the owner of all lands not ruled by Christian monarchs, donated all of the newly discovered land to the Spanish crown. The reason, the Pope wrote, was to ensure “that the Catholic faith ... be the more greatly exalted in our time, and that we seek the salvation of souls, and that the barbarian nations be dismantled and subjugated to the same faith.”

My own European Protestant ancestors justified conquest and genocide with a different but equally devastating theology. They saw themselves as the “New Israel” to whom God had given this “Promised Land” in order to establish a Christian nation. Later that same theology became the doctrine of the Manifest Destiny of the United States – that the U.S. was elected by God to govern the entire North American continent. Those same Protestant ancestors developed an apocalyptic theology that only when the U.S. ruled all of the continent from Panama to the Canadian border- would the Second Coming of Jesus occur.
Where have we been? Knowing the history of immigration policy, law, and this border is critical to understanding the current context. Let me briefly sketch that history for us – the themes are consistent.

This Southwest border is established when the United States declared the annexation of Texas and sent troops to the Rio Grande in 1846. A full-scale war and invasion of Mexico resulted in two treaties in 1848 and 1853 that established the present border. The U.S. annexed 55% of Mexico’s territory: what today are the states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Utah, Nevada, and California.

Between 1875 and 1918 the first immigration laws are passed giving the federal government the authority to regulate immigration. Until 1875 all the legislation had been enacted to encourage and support immigration. These first laws were passes so that “lunatics, convicts, polygamists, professional beggars, anarchists, those suffering from a loathsome disease, and woman for the purpose of prostitution” are barred from entry to the U.S.

The Chinese Exclusion Act is passed in 1882 because the great fear among Americans is that all of China will migrate across the Pacific. Of course, that fear quickly gave way to the ambivalence that marks the entire history of immigration policy when Chinese labor became essential for the building of the western railroads. In 1917 that same fear and racism reasserted itself in legislation banning anyone from all of Asia and the Pacific Islands from entry.

The Border Patrol is established in 1924 – the first federal enforcement on the Southwest border. Of course people had migrated freely across this border for generations. Over one million Mexicans fled north during the decade of the Mexican revolution. Since Prohibition was policy then, the primary function of the Border Patrol was to keep “demon rum and tequila” from crossing the border.

My Protestant ancestors were hard at work legislating quotas for particular nationalities – especially the Catholic countries of Southern Europe and Ireland. The fear was that the Pope was plotting to take over the U.S. through immigration. Remember that the KKK had two goals: enforce Jim Crow laws and stop immigration.

The Great Depression, like all economic recessions, resulted in harsh anti-immigrant legislation and anti-Mexican sentiment. The Southwest border is locked-down and hundreds of thousands of persons of Mexican decent are rounded-up at gunpoint and deported.

In 1942, the policy reverses 180 degrees when the U.S. goes to war. The Bracero Program (a guest worker program) is enacted to encourage migration in order to support agriculture and war-related industry in the U.S. The Bracero Program continues to be vital to post-war economic growth and is not ended until the recession of 1964. But a major dependency has
been established in the economies of both the U.S. and Mexico on the ability of workers to migrate to support their families. With the end of guest worker visas, a new phenomenon occurs. With the wink-and-nod of both governments, Mexican workers jump the border, go to work, then migrate back to their families.

During this time, of course, not everyone migrated back to Mexico. About ¼ of migrant workers settled down in the U.S., got married, and established families and permanent work. The U.S. recognized the need for legal status and about every 12 years established a “registration” whereby undocumented workers could register for legal status. 1974 and 1986 were the last two years for such a program. In a political deal, President Regan agreed (for the first time in history) to enact employer sanctions in exchange for an amnesty for 3 million migrants.

Where have we been? The themes from or history are evident. Racism has been a consistent theme from the Asiatic exclusion, to Southern Europeans, to Mexicans. Economic expansion and depression dictate immigration policy. Fear of the “other” is woven throughout our history.

Where have we been? - meaning the church. Well except for the devastating period of conquest, plunder, and genocide by the Empires of Europe on this continent; and the devastating period of conquest, plunder, slavery, and genocide by the emerging American Empire of Manifest Destiny – we (the church) have had significant moments of being authentic church.

Between 1820 and 1924, the U.S. welcomed and adsorbed more than 30 million immigrants – the largest migration in human history. Those European migrants brought their faith history with them and built churches and schools and social welfare institutions that were for the most part faith-based. Neighborhoods in the burgeoning cities became identified with nationalities and faith traditions. Settlement houses for newly arrived immigrants were established by all denominations to teach English, educate women, teach skills, and organize tenements. Schools and colleges were established by all of the denominations long before there were land-grant universities. I was gently informed when I spoke recently at Boston College that that great institution was founded because Catholics could not be admitted to Harvard or Yale. It is evident that the church or synagogue was at the heart of every migrant community during the century of the Great Migration, providing pastoral care, education, hospitals, social services colleges, and a center for faith, community, and culture. We do not have time to discuss the essential role of the church in union organizing to end child labor, sweat-shops, and exploitation.

Let me mention some other moments of authentic ministry in the more recent history of immigration. After World War II, with the arrival of migrant agricultural workers in the Bracero
Program, the church responded with a proliferation of migrant ministries. The abuses of migrant workers – low pay, hazardous work, pesticides, lack of medical care, decrepit housing, lack of education for children – have all been documented. The church responded in meeting basic needs through migrant ministries. Although almost all of these efforts were designed to meet the social welfare needs of the migrants, communities of faith were formed in the fields and the beginnings of organizing efforts took shape.

Even though it was conventional wisdom that migrant and undocumented workers could not be organized, Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta began a Farmworker’s Union. The church was an essential factor in that impossible movement. Farmworker’s Masses became the rallying center for union organizing. The faith of the workers became the strength of the movement. Fasting and non-violence were the ethical and spiritual core. Churches across the nation became the organizing base for boycotts of grapes. The church had moved from charity to justice in ministry.

Another moment in recent history in which church has played a vital role continues after 50 years. A community organizer by the name of Saul Alinsky, faced with organizing the poorest slums and ghettos of the Southside of Chicago, had the insight that the only stable institutions left in those poverty stricken neighborhoods were the churches and the schools. They would become the social base for organizing communities to gain influence and power to change lives and neighborhoods. These community organizations have made major changes in urban areas across the country and churches have provided essential funding, leadership training, and centers for organizing. The church is moving from charity to organizing for justice among the poor.

Now I would like to return to the borderlands of the 1980’s and a movement of faith communities we called Sanctuary, and to some lessons we learned from that time. The crisis on the border in 1980 was very different from the current life-and-death crisis. In 1980 we began to learn that refugees from the death squads, torture, and massacres of villages in El Salvador and Guatemala were arriving at the border. The U.S. government refused to recognize them as refugees and thousands were being arrested, imprisoned, and deported in handcuffs back to the death squads, torture, massacres, and wars of Central America. The church on both sides of the border began to respond in ministry to the needs of the refugees in the ways you would expect – food, shelter, medical care, and legal aid. Refugees were enabled by church volunteers to apply for political asylum. They were then represented at hearings by lawyers funded by the Tucson Ecumenical Council. But by 1981 we were dismayed to learn that no one from El Salvador or Guatemala was being granted political asylum by immigration judges. You see, the U.S. government was in political, military, and economic support of the regimes that
were ordering the repression. Our allies could not be creating refugees – we were bringing democracy and development to Central America.

My colleague Jim Corbett, a brilliant Quaker and rancher in the borderlands defined the ethical challenge to the church clearly. He pointed to two examples in history. The first was the abolition movement, when churches and people of faith formed an underground railroad to help escaped slaves cross borders safely and move north to safety. The second was the failure of the church in Europe to protect Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust. “We cannot allow that failure on our border in our time”, he said.

And so a few of us began to smuggle refugees safely across the border and hide them in homes in Tucson. It didn’t take long to run out of room in homes and the church that I served as Pastor began to take in refugees. It also didn’t take long (about 6 months) for the Border Patrol to discover our smuggling organization. They sent us a message, “We know what you are doing. Stop it, or we will indict you on felony charges.”

Primarily in self-defense, we decided to go public before we were indicted by declaring Southside Presbyterian Church a Sanctuary for refugees from Central America. Four other churches joined us on March 24, 1982 and a movement began. Protestant churches, Catholic parishes and monasteries, Jewish synagogues, and Quaker meetings began to declare Sanctuary and protect refugees within their community of faith. What became to be known as “The New Underground Railroad” moved refugees safely from the border to sanctuaries across the country. Then the underground railroad linked churches and people of faith from Central America through Mexico, across the U.S., and on to Canada. And then a German Church declared Sanctuary and was joined by other churches across Europe.

What originated in communities of faith became appropriated by governments and universities as well. Seventeen cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco were the largest) became cities of sanctuary. New Mexico was a state of sanctuary, and colleges and universities joined the movement in the tradition of the free university. A movement was born.

And so, the U.S. government made a decision in 1984 to move against the Sanctuary Movement. The FBI and INS infiltrated sanctuary churches with undercover agents and paid informants pretending to be volunteers. They secretly recorded worship services, conversations with Pastors, and meetings in churches. This was the first time in American history that the government admitted sending government agents into churches without a warrant.

In 1985, sixteen people were indicted and changed with various felonies: 2 Catholic Priests, 3 Women Religious, the Director of the Tucson Ecumenical Council, myself, and various Quaker, Unitarian, and other church volunteers. Since the Federal Judge ruled before the trial that we
could say nothing in our defense about International Refugee Law, U.S. Refugee Law, conditions in Central America, or our religious faith, we did not put on a defense and were found guilty.

The first defendant to be sentenced, Sister Darlene Nicgorski, was told by the judge that he would be lenient in her case. She would be sentenced to 5 years probation on the condition that she not have anything to do with the Sanctuary Movement. Sister Darlene replied that if the judge did not send her to prison, she would have to serve refugees in Sanctuary. It was her faith. “Make up your mind, Judge, what you want to do.” After a brief recess, the judge returned and sentenced Sister Darlene to 5 years probation. Along with all the other defendants, Darlene returned to the vocation of sanctuary.

Determined to take the legal offensive, the movement filed a civil suit against the Attorney General for U.S. violations of refugee law. After three years of legal maneuvering, the Justice Department settled the suit by agreeing to:

1. Stop all deportations to El Salvador and Guatemala.
2. Give all persons from these countries temporary legal status and review of political asylum claims.

Another civil suit on behalf of the churches resulted in a federal court judgement that the infiltration of the churches by government agents had been a violation of the First Amendment “free exercise of religion” clause.

What did we learn from the decade of Sanctuary? Let me suggest four enduring lessons.

First, that the church and synagogue can be an effective community base for active, non-violent resistance to government violations of human rights.

Second, that the church has a responsibility to protect the victims of human rights violations - both legally and morally. We called it Civil Initiative: the legal right and ethical responsibility to protect the victims of human rights violations when government is the violator. When we declared Southside Church a Sanctuary, I believed we were practicing civil disobedience. The government had threatened to indict us. A call from a human rights attorney turned that misconception around. “You are not doing civil disobedience. It’s the government that is violating U.S. refugee law- not you.”

Third, that the church is a global institution capable of forming effective relationships to protect the poor and persecuted across national borders.

Fourth, that by entering into protective community with the poor, the church becomes spiritually transformed. The sanctuary church in North America provided a safe place for the refugees to speak truth to power.
The poor of Central America taught us how to read the Bible through their eyes and through the experience of a persecuted and martyred church. Only God knows how many lives were saved by the Sanctuary Movement but it is clear that the refugees saved the soul of countless churches in North America.

We needed all of those lessons and experiences from the border and from church history as the current crisis on the Southwest border began in 1994. During the recession of the early 90’s, politicians found anti-immigrant and “illegal alien” rhetoric to be very popular. In response, the Clinton Administration began a new border enforcement strategy that was designed to look tough on immigration. In various sectors of the border it was called Operation Hold the Line, Operation Rio Grande, Operation Gatekeeper, and Operation Safeguard.

Sixteen foot high steel walls were built across the urban areas of the border and the number of Border Patrol agents, vehicles, and technology were quadrupled to seal off those urban areas from migration. Historically, almost all immigrants crossed the border in these urban areas which were familiar and easily accessible with largely Hispanic populations. Then the strategy called for border enforcement to be extended outward from those urban areas. The strategy was designed to force the migration of workers into increasingly isolated and hazardous areas of the border where migrants would face the extreme elements of deserts and mountains. When the word gets out about how life-threatening and hazardous the crossing is, the strategy forecast, that will be a deterrent to others seeking to cross and we will gain control of the border. The plan called for enforcement to be initiated in Texas and California because the Immigration Service believed that the Sonora Desert of Arizona would be a geographic barrier to migration.

The strategy has been a tragic failure for two reasons.

First, the strategy never understood the desperation of poverty in Mexico and Central America. The U.S. government had no concept that the poor would risk everything – even their lives – to feed their hungry children.

Second, the strategy was implemented in 1994, the very same year that the North American Free Trade Agreement was implemented. In fact, there is a direct correlation between the two.

Despite the utopian predictions of the advocates of NAFTA, realists knew that free trade would devastate the small and subsistence farmers and the poor of Mexico. The World Bank reports that over 3 million small farmers have been driven off the land in Mexico because of NAFTA. These small farmers had nowhere to work to feed their families. It became necessary to risk everything in a border crossing to find work in the U.S. Since 1994, over 6,000 poor migrants – men, and increasingly women and children – have died cruel deaths in the deserts and
mountains of the borderlands. And for the past twelve years, Arizona has been the epicenter of the deaths and suffering.

Where have we been? - As faith communities in Arizona? In 2000, as migrants began dying in the Sonoran Desert, we pulled together folks from both sides of the border who had been part of the Sanctuary Movement to struggle with the question of faith and ethics in this new crisis. An organization called Humane Borders was formed to put water tanks out in the critical areas of the desert where deaths were mounting. Countless lives have been saved by these water stations marked by a blue flag above the desert vegetation.

Two years later, Samaritans was organized to put 4-wheel-drive vehicles out on the remote back roads of the desert. Each day volunteer doctors, nurses, EMT’s, and Spanish-speakers from Tucson and Green Valley take food, water, and emergency medical gear to the desert. They have found hundreds upon hundreds of migrants suffering from heatstroke, dehydration, broken limbs, twisted joints, heart attacks, strokes, and rattlesnake bites. They have rescued the victims of rape and beatings, the lost and abandoned.

Two years later, in 2004, No More Deaths was organized to put a 24 hour presence of volunteers in camps in the desert. Volunteers leave camp each morning to hike the migrant trails with backpacks filled with food, water, and first-aid gear. Volunteers come from all over the U.S. to be trained and work from the camp. Water supplies and food are placed on the trails by No More Death volunteers and a medical treatment facility has been established at the camp.

The stories from the desert camp are legion but just one will have to do under our time constraints. As our volunteers hike the migrant trails each day, they call out in Spanish, “We have food. We have water. Do you need medical care? Don’t be afraid. We are from the church.” One morning as a group of volunteers topped a ridge, they saw a group of about twenty migrants in the canyon below. Our volunteers could see the migrants gathering to talk and then start up the trail toward them. When the migrants were closer, the man in the front called out, “We are out of food and only have a little water- but we’ll share what we have.” I tell you, brothers and sisters, that is the most Christian act I have ever seen in my life in the church.

Two years later, No more Deaths organized an aid-station at the border crossing in Nogales, Sonora in partnership with the government of Mexico to provide food, water, and medical care for migrants being deported to Mexico. As volunteers talked with deported migrants, stories of abusive treatment while in the custody of Border Patrol began to unfold. A documentation project has resulted in over 14,000 interviews with migrants which demonstrate systemic abuses of basic human rights by Border Patrol: deprivation of food and water in detention, physical and verbal abuse, and separation of families through deportation to separate regions.
of the border. A report documenting these systemic abuses titled “A Culture of Cruelty” was released last fall.

Two years later, the Diocese of Tucson, the Diocese of Hermosillo, and the Jesuits founded the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Sonora which provides hot meals, clothing, and medical care for recently deported migrants in increasingly effective ways. This ministry is replicated by the church in many border cities from Tijuana to Matamoros.

Since 1994, some conclusions can be reached about this tragically failed border enforcement strategy and immigration policy.

1. The border enforcement policy has failed to secure the border. Migration has remained constant or increased each year since 1994, with the only decreases occurring during the U.S. recessions of 2000 and 2008. The price of cocaine on the streets has been the most stable commodity over the past 30 years.

2. The border enforcement strategy is a violation of human rights and International Law. A 6 judge panel of the Inter-American Court ruled unanimously in 2003 that the U.S. is in violation of human rights by continuing a border enforcement that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of migrants. This conclusion has since been affirmed by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

3. Despite its failure and violations of International Law, the strategy continues because of the politics of fear and racism so prevalent in the U.S. Migrant workers and their families are termed “illegals” and “criminals”. A recent candidate for the U.S. Senate from Arizona said, “These people don’t come here to work. They come here to rob and deal drugs ... We need the National Guard to clean up our cities and round them up ... They have no problem slititng your throat and taking your money or raping your daughter and they are evil people.”

4. The Obama Administration has been the most devastating administration in U.S. history toward immigrant communities and families. ICE raids and the cooperation of local law enforcement have resulted in record numbers of deportations. Mothers and fathers of U.S. citizen children are being disappeared and deported from our communities and churches. Again, this has been determined to be a violation of human rights and International Law by the U.N. Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International.

One more story. Luis was picked up by the Phoenix Police in a traffic stop because the taillight was out on his car. Because he had no documents he was turned over to ICE agents and deported. Luis had been working as a dishwasher in an upscale Phoenix restaurant for 11 years.
His body was found in the desert in August. Luis died trying to get back to his wife and three children; 9 years old, 5 years old and 7 months.

Where have we been? In ministry as the church? We have evolved from charity to advocacy to justice. Humanitarian aid to migrants on both sides of the border is essential to saving lives and relieving suffering. These ministries must continue and expand as the death-toll rises.

Churches and all faith communities have developed a strong and now unified social witness policy on comprehensive immigration reform and border protection. Titled “The Interfaith Comprehensive Immigration Reform Statement”, more than 150 denominational bodies have signed it. Its positions are supported by the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, the Jewish Federation, the Muslim Federation, the Mormon Church, and even the National Association of Evangelicals. That’s what is called diversity.

Faith-based ecumenical organizations such as Samaritans and No More Deaths are getting in the way of death and suffering in the desert and are saving many migrant lives.

And a “New Sanctuary Movement” has emerged among churches and synagogues across the U.S. to provide a ministry of active, non-violent resistance to the deportation of undocumented parents of U.S. citizen children. If the election this fall does not result in comprehensive immigration reform legislation, I expect that the New Sanctuary Movement will grow more rapidly than the old one of the 80’s.

The most important change for the church to be faithful in our time must be a spiritual transformation. This spiritual transformation has been a part of our history since the gospels were written. In the gospels, Jesus teases that “I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, and an alien … As you do to the least of these … you do to me.

And Jesus calls a new community of faith around Him and proclaims, “Blessed are the poor. Blessed those who mourn. Blessed the hungry. Blessed the peacemakers.”

And then the Risen Christ appears as an alien/stranger to disciples on the road to Emmaus and opens the scriptures to them and is recognized in their hospitality and the breaking of bread.

That spiritual transformation was spoken about at the meeting of the Latin American Bishops at Medellin when they proclaimed God’s “preferential option for the poor”. And now that same Spirit is migrating North with the poor. It is the conversion that contains the grace to save the soul of the church. The Risen Christ is present in the poor and the suffering and the migrant. We experience that holy blessed presence when the church is present in those communities and in relationships of solidarity with the poor.
Consider the spiritual transformation of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Romero was a timid and quite conservative Bishop when he was selected to become Archbishop by the Vatican. His Mass of Celebration was picketed by many of the Priests who believed that the Vatican had acquiesced to the rich and powerful oligarchs of El Salvador.

Shortly after his installation, the death squads gunned down one of the best and brightest Priests, Father Rutillio Grande and placed his bullet ridden body on the altar of the church in Augillares. They then sent a message to Archbishop Romero that only he could claim the body of Rutillio Grande.

As Romero told the story – As the Archbishop picked up the body of his Priest, he believed that the body was transformed into the body of Christ. From that moment, Archbishop Romero knew that Christ was present among the suffering poor of El Salvador and that he must serve the poor in solidarity.

I believe that the poor are being crucified in the desert – and the church, to be faithful, must be there.

I believe that the poor are being crucified as families are being devastated by deportations and ICE raids – and the church, to be faithful, must get in the way.

I believe that is where Christ is present – and if we are faithful, where we must be.