

## Red Tape Stymies Refugee Kids

*Lois Sweet (Toronto Star)*

Lloyd Jones has a mission, and he isn't about to let a small thing like resistance from the provincial government stop him.

War in Central America has resulted in a large number of people escaping to Mexico and the U.S., which are reluctant to accord them refugee status. Jones, 48, is concerned about the plight of those destined to be deported back to the countries they fled.

### Provide sanctuary

In the United States, church-affiliated groups are illegally providing sanctuary and shelter to people in danger of being deported, while lobbying the government to give them official refugee status. The Americans in what is known as the sanctuary movement are at some risk; the Reagan government is threatening to prosecute them for aiding illegal immigrants.

Jones decided to follow their example in Canada — but legally. He felt that Canadians could help the refugees — in particular the kids less than 18 years old who are known as "unaccompanied minors." He began to organize in his home community of Thunder Bay.

Helping kids isn't new to Jones and his wife, Willa, 51. They have four children of their own, two adopted children, two foster children, and recently took in an 18-year-old from a Hong Kong refugee camp. At one time, they had four Vietnamese refugee children living with them as well. Space isn't a problem since they run an international hostel.

But the need is great. Jones knew that, under federal government regulations, unaccompanied minors could come into the country under a foster plan arrangement if the provincial government approved of the foster homes.

For every young person coming into Canada, five families are needed — one to be the family with whom the child will live, one to provide back-up and three others to provide financial support.

The complication for Jones and, as he puts it, "other mavericks in the Canadian refugee movement," is that the federal and provincial governments don't have a policy on refugees from Central America. The federal government approves them on a case-by-case basis.

Last January, people in Thunder Bay heard about a 17-year-old El Salvadoran being hidden in the U.S. who was desperately in need of a home. Canadian foster parents were found, all the bureaucratic hurdles were jumped and he arrived safely. So, in April when Jones heard of other boys in the U.S. who needed homes, he assumed it was simply a matter of going through the same process.

Wrong. Immigration told him that Ontario wouldn't admit any Central American youth under the age of 18, even if there were five foster families willing to support them.

Pat Whiteside, manager of policy coordination for the Ministry of Community and Social Services (COMSOC), called the first case "an anomaly" and said the boy in question shouldn't have been accepted.

Jones and other people in Thunder Bay were extremely concerned about what might happen to the hidden refugees, as were the Americans who were sheltering them. In July, the Americans eventually took four Central Americans over the border crossing at Pigeon River, where the youths declared themselves refugees. The immigration department was forced to make a decision. The young people were allowed to stay.

According to Whiteside, the provincial government is unaware of any risks Central American minors might be subjected to if they were forced to return home.

But the first youth to be legally admitted says that from their early teens, boys in El Salvador and Guatemala are pressured to join either the guerrillas or government army troops. "Everyone is paranoid of being prosecuted," he says. "You have to see a lot of the things the military has done to understand how they teach people to kill and rape."

Jones says that York University did a study of 2,000 Central Americans deported from the U.S. Of that number, 50 are known to be dead.

"Unfortunately, Lloyd Jones won't accept the reality of the limitations of what the government of Ontario, charged with serving 8 million people, can do," says Whiteside. "We can't respond on a case-by-case basis, or the legislation would look like a pretzel. Besides, we have children in Ontario that need help. There are only a certain amount of resources and we can't go off ragging about two or three or 15 kids."

### Has a responsibility

Jones, on the other hand, believes that Ontario has a responsibility to take a firm stand. "This is an important human rights issue," he says. "We can't change American policy, but we can do something about ours. To my mind, it's very cruel."

Tom Clark, co-ordinator of the Inter-Church Committee for refugees, suspects that the Ontario stand is simply "fear of the unknown, because we don't have any bounds worked out. I'd like to see a delegation meet in formal consultation with the provincial government," he says. "We have to get to the bottom of their resistance."

If Whiteside mirrors the feelings of COMSOC, a delegation won't be greeted with open arms. "No one can be infinitely responsible to humanitarian concerns unless you're God," she says. "And even He isn't doing very well."