

ARTBOUND

How Lincoln Heights' Church of the Epiphany Energized the Chicano Movement

By Carren Jao, April 4, 2018



Artbound "La Raza" is a KCETLink production in association with the Autry Museum of the American West and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Learn more about the group of young activists that became the voice for the movimiento on "Artbound" [S9 E2: La Raza](#). Watch now.

Nothing signals "Revolution HQ" about the Church of the Epiphany in Lincoln Heights. Its chocolate brown beams, gray-brown stonework and customary ecclesiastical architecture seem standard for a small community church in Lincoln Heights, but if its walls could speak, perhaps they would rally and roar because this place of worship was also a place of resistance in the 1960s and 70s.

"This church became a magnet to come and organize," said Ravi GuneWardena, preservation architect for the church along with Frank Escher of Escher GuneWardena Architecture. "The basement of the church was given for activities. The newspaper, La Raza, was edited and created

here. The Brown Berets met at the church. Both Robert Kennedy and César Chávez used it as a Los Angeles base."

Nothing speaks of its rebellious history more eloquently than the artwork that adorned its walls and ceiling these past three months. Inside the church's Gothic Revival interiors, paper plane-like installations fly overhead (artist Ismael de Anda's "Love Duster"), a tied up mattress occupies the aisle (Camilo Ontiveros's "Deportables") and tearful photos of families reunited for three minutes across the U.S.-Mexico border hang on a wall (Tish Lampert's "3 Minutes Allowed – Door of Hope"). The artwork is part of "The Art of Protest: Epiphany and the Culture of Empowerment," an exhibition that finished its run at the end of March. The exhibition was co-curated by LACMA educator Sofia Gutierrez; artist Ricardo Reyes, who was already working with the church during the Chicano Moratorium; historian Rosalío Muñoz, co-chair of the Chicano Moratorium; and GuneWardena. Many other artists works were shown in the church, each with an eye toward social justice.

"[We] chose these artists because they reflect the values of the cause and the culture of activism, social justice and civil rights which the Chicano and Mexican American leadership and youth refined at the Church of the Epiphany in the 1960s and 70s," said Gutierrez.

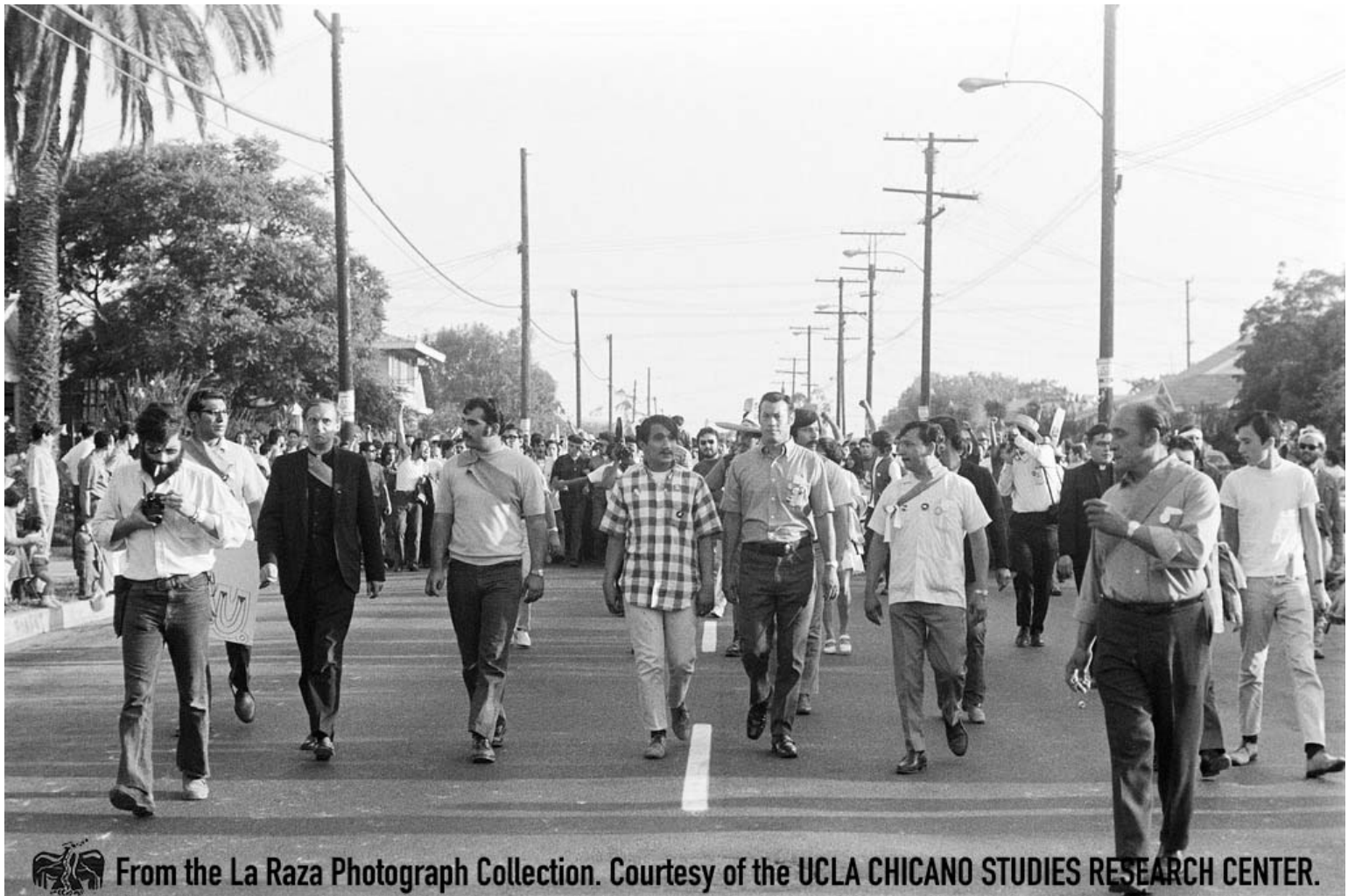


Church of the Epiphany exterior | Carren Jao

Even before the Chicano Movement, the church had a deep history in the community. Founded in 1887, it is one of the oldest continuing Episcopal congregations in Los Angeles. It has seen its Lincoln Heights neighborhood transform from a predominantly-Anglo population to one defined by Mexican immigrants.

Perhaps moved by the community it serves, its religious leaders during the 1960s and 70s became vocal defenders of the Chicano Movement, even though they did not share the community's culture, or even their religious background (most Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are Roman Catholics.)

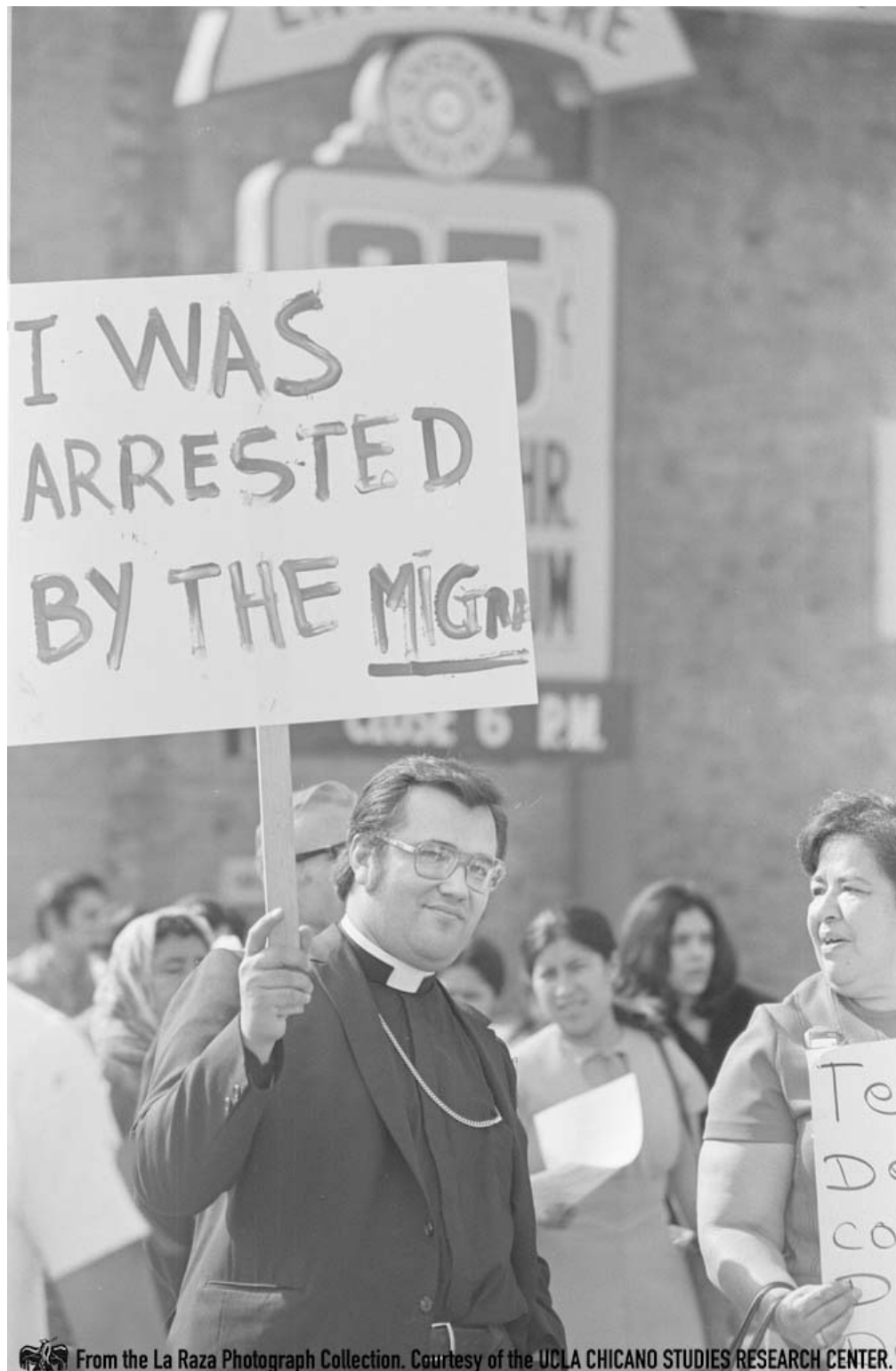
Father Tom Carey, the church's vicar today, has another theory. "Those priests were a part of a generation of clergymen that were changed because of the experience of World War II." The Barragan brothers, who were both priests, and even Sister Mary Corita, were part of this national zeitgeist.



Father Luce and others lead protesters during the National Chicano Moratorium in Laguna Park | La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

The three central clergy in the Church of Epiphany during the 60s and 70s are: Fathers John Luce, Roger Wood and Oliver Garver. They were also assisted by Virginia Cueto Ram, the church's program director, a beloved figure who bridged the church's primarily Anglo congregation to its rapidly

changing demographic in the 1960s. “[She] brought in the need to establish a Mexican-American mindset to the church’s programming,” said church historian and co-curator Rosalio Muñoz.



Virginia Ram and a priest march against Dixon-ARnett Act in Los Angeles | Pedro Arias, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center
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It's not that the church did not care for the Civil Rights or Chicano movement before the arrival of Luce, "it's just that when John Luce arrived, the moment did too" says Carey.

The turbulent Civil Rights Movement had swept the nation, yes, but in this Lincoln Heights neighborhood, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction particularly in the Latino community.

Newly arrived to the community in 1965, Luce, a "tall, slender 34-year-old" who worked in a Spanish-speaking New York City congregation headed straight for the Redwood Bar in downtown, a favorite hangout for Los Angeles Times journalists. There, he got a feel for the neighborhood thanks to the city's reporters, not to mention a glimpse of the mistreatment of Chicanos.

"The injustices were enormous," Wood said in "A Cleansing Fire: The Rise of the Chicano Movement and the Church of the Epiphany," a historical booklet published by the church in 2007. "People were being reprimanded for speaking Spanish in the schoolyard, they were being pushed off into vocational schools and being told: *college isn't for you*. I wasn't just reading about that, people were experiencing that."

Chicanos were treated like second-class citizens, forbidden to speak their language and subject to police harassment. "I got arrested by the sheriffs and harassed... my brother got arrested," Carlos Montes, former Minister of Information for the Brown Berets, said in "A Cleansing Fire." "They would trump charges; they would stop us and give us tickets." Rather than be

harassed for violating curfew, 13-year-old Salvador Barba ran from three officers. When the police caught up with him, they made their arrest and sent Barba to the hospital with two broken vertebra, internal bleeding in his groin area and 40 stitches for head injuries.

Safe havens were hard to find, and so the church led by the four stepped up.

The Church gave the community a place where their culture could thrive. Here at last was a place that didn't attempt to erase their culture, but celebrate it. "An important aspect of what happened at the church in the 1960s was an acknowledging of Latino culture," said GuneWardena, "Especially in a historically Eurocentric church as the Episcopal church, the inclusion of Folklórico (Mexican folk dance) and Aztec dance and their aesthetics into the church liturgy was of great transformative significance for the Latino community. Church art included Aztec and Maya figures as the three kings, liturgy incorporated Mariachi music, Spanish language songs and hymns, papel picado was hung inside the church, Day of the Dead was celebrated as in Mexican tradition and people began to feel proud of their culture instead of being ashamed. The church also began its own art program that was taught by Ricardo Reyes, one of the curators."

Not only did the church provide a place to be one's self, but it also helped push for social change by becoming an integral part of many movements working to change the Latino community.

“Father John Luce was our patron saint.” Moctezuma Esparza, a community activist and now a filmmaker, tells KCET. “He offered us his church, his basement for us to meet and to hang out. He took us on the march from Delano to Sacramento.”

The church would support César Chávez’s United Farm Workers by taking caravans of young people to Delano, California, with food and clothes in tow. When Chávez and his farm workers needed a place to stay, the church opened its doors to them: offering Luce’s home across the street and the church hall. The priests and some members of their congregation were even present when the farm workers protested chain stores selling non-union produce.

“When all those boycotts of Safeway and all that, Roger Wood was there with his dog at the picket line,” recalls Lydia López, Canon of the Diocese of Los Angeles, who was active at the church in that era.

“I remember spending many nights in Father Luce’s rectory, where he lived. He’d be drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and talking about politics,” Esparza told KCET, “He never preached to us. He never asked us to go to church or mass. What he did focus on was how to organize and what we needed to do, to do that. How you talk to folks and how you focused on what was important to them and spoke to them about their hopes and dreams. That could be how you could inspire people to action. These were extraordinary moments because it was very rare that anyone spent time with us to talk to us that way.”

The church also acted as headquarters for Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign. Farm workers and the Mexican-American community mobilized at Epiphany to help Kennedy achieve primary victory in California.



Cesar Chavez at the Church of the Epiphany | Courtesy of the Church of the Epiphany

When Kennedy was assassinated, the parishioners and the farmer workers were devastated, but they also realized that they had harnessed the power of the Chicano vote and used that opportunity to elect Chicano candidates like Art Torres and Richard Alatorre.

“Epiphany was part of that movement toward getting Latino representation in Sacramento,” says Chris Hartmire, a Presbyterian minister and former director of the National Farm Worker Ministry.

La Raza, now heralded as the voice of the Chicano movement, also started at the church. Eliezer Joaquin Risco, one of the magazine’s founders, began with a position at one of the church’s low-income youth programs. It was his work with the neighborhood that spawned the idea for the magazine.

“One of the things we discerned was that there was no communication between the barrios,” Risco said, “The only communication was the one between the newspapers and they only represented society’s prejudices.”

Finally, there was a place for the people to vent their thoughts and frustrations. At times, people were too upset to write their own stories for print, and thus the editors sat them beside a writer to help get their story down on paper.

It was Luce who hired Carlos Montes, then a student at East Los Angeles College, to help distribute the newly birthed newspaper. From there, Montes would join Young Chicanos for Community Action, which would later become the Brown Berets, a group of Latinos who pursued a more action-oriented strategy when facing the problems of being Latino at the time. The kcet.org/shows/artbound/how-lincoln-heights-church-of-the-epiphany-energized-the-chicano-movement

Brown Berets' first meetings were at Epiphany, eventually moving to La Piranya Coffee House, which Luce had helped find funding for. The Brown Berets and the Epiphany's association put them on the police hotlist. Police Chief Edward M. Davis accused the priest of having created the "avowedly communist organization."

During the East L.A. Blowouts, an organized walkout of high school students from Roosevelt, Wilson, Lincoln, Garfield and Belmont, the church once again became ground zero for organizing activity.

The walkouts epitomized the perfect storm that the Church of the Epiphany helped create: the church's youth groups worked with the Brown Berets, who became bodyguards for the high schoolers, while La Raza printed the views of the young Latino population.

When thirteen of the organizers were indicted before the grand jury, Epiphany took a stand and spoke out against the move. Garver gave a stirring sermon at Pasadena's All Saints' Episcopal Church, condemning the authorities responsible for the Chicano activists' arrests.

When Sal Castro, a high school teacher and community activist, was removed from the classroom. The three priests were right there in the picket line alongside Chicanos. The event celebrated a mass using a tortilla as host when the community decided to take over the Board of Education offices in protest. Fathers Luce and Wood were among the 35 arrested during that mass sit-in.

The parish was also right there during the Chicano Moratorium. Father Luce was riding on a flatbed truck with Ruben Salazar right before his death at the Silver Dollar bar.

Again and again, the church proved its commitment to social justice and to their community throughout the 60s and 70s. But like its story, like many others, also waxes and wanes. "Good things happened all the time," said Carey, "but [Father Roger] Wood left in 1983, the church's physical structure started to deteriorate, there was also some tension between the recent arrivals from El Salvador and old-time Chicano congregation members in the intervening time , which resolved itself."

These days, the church continues its work in the community. It offers a food bank, renter's clinics, mental health support, youth programs, as well as arts programs focused on the Chicanx community it serves. The church is also part of immigration rights and LGBTQ rights activist programs.

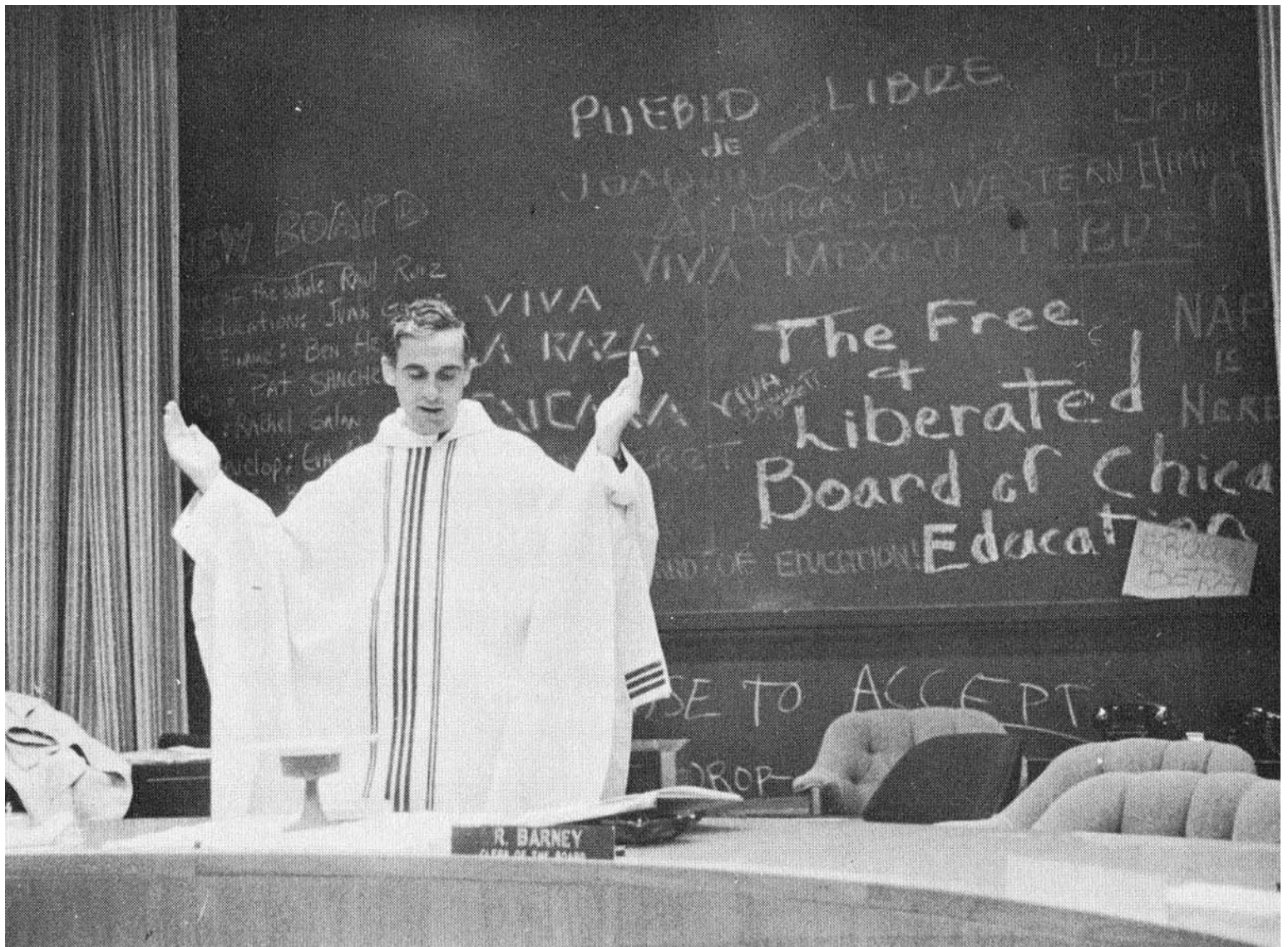
Currently, Epiphany is part of the Sacred Resistance coalition, which resists the injustice it sees perpetrated by the Trump administration. But it's also showing signs of age from more than a century of use; the church is continually raising funds for its restoration, which is headed by architecture firm Escher GuneWardena.

The initial intervention in 2010 was able to remove the church's historic stained glass to prevent further loss, says GuneWardena. In 2013, work on the Parish Hall also began. The church also held two more fundraising art auctions, from which they were able to repair the windows and do

earthquake retrofitting. But more still needs to be done, said GuneWardena. “[The church] needs a new roof, the basement needs to be upgraded to be usable — the church wants to use that space for legal clinics geared toward immigrants and healthcare services.” GuneWardena is hoping the church can raise \$500,000 for this round of work. The church also won a matching grant from National Fund for Sacred Places, which is a grant-making program of Partners for Sacred Places in collaboration with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, where the organization would match \$1 for every \$2 raised.

Despite its wear and tear, the church — like a rebel with a cause — marches on. “The Church of the Epiphany is a sanctuary space, a space for hope,” said Gutierrez. The history of this church in activism and fighting for social justice is well documented. For the immigrant, the discarded, and the underserved this church continues to be that sanctuary of hope. And because of today’s events, the sanctuary of this church is needed more than ever.”

“Each generation has to find their own way of taking up the civil rights struggle,” said Muñoz. Perhaps that journey begins by looking toward this church’s revolutionary history and the role of the younger generation in making a change.



Father Luce gives mass | Courtesy of the Church of the Epiphany

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Top Image: Father John Luce saying a prayer at the Board of Education meeting / Devra Weber, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center