

My church changed when ICE took one of our own

Shouting against injustice is harder than lamenting it from afar. But it gets easier.

by [Ellen Clark Clémot](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue



We had read about the undocumented immigrants being arrested in unlikely places all over the country. But last January, when the one taken away was Roby, one of our own congregants—a man who was well liked and well known, a man of deep and sincere faith, a man who for 22 years has been with his family in our church pews every Sunday—something new happened. We changed from being a congregation of peaceful bystanders to becoming a community of active protesters. Myself included. All of a sudden, we woke.

Some folks say our eyes were opened because community activists got involved. These activists knew how to use social media to get the word out about Roby's

arrest. They mobilized the entire town. When we called for a prayer vigil at our church, they helped us rally 600 people to come—a big crowd for a rainy Sunday afternoon in suburbia.

Others say we woke because Roby and his family grew up with us: in church, in school, in our town. They are part of our family. They have a place in our hearts. We support Roby as one of our own, in indignation at the injustice of it all.

And even though his arrest took us by surprise, it would be unfair to say my church in central New Jersey was completely unprepared. Since the early 1990s, long before I arrived as interim pastor, we have included in our congregation about 80 Indonesian Christians who first came to the United States fleeing religious persecution from extremist members of the Muslim majority in Indonesia. Over the past 30 years we have arranged for Indonesian language worship services in the afternoon, hired an Indonesian pastor, joined together for Sunday school, and tried to integrate Indonesian members into our church governance and ministries.

But we struggle. The typical Indonesian immigrant in our community works a second or third shift. It's difficult for people working those hours to serve on church committees that typically meet in the evenings. For the rest of the congregation, the Indonesians are part of the church but only visible at the spring rummage sale where they do the lion's share of clothes sorting and setting up, or at the all-church picnic where they grill their famously spicy chicken kebabs, or on the first Sunday of each month at our shared morning communion service. We don't ask them about immigration status. We're law-abiders and rule-followers and like to think that everybody's life is in order like our own.

I'm that way, too, most of the time. I spent the first 25 years of my career practicing law, upholding and defending the law. But ministry makes for legal challenges. As interim pastor of a 300-year-old church with a 30-year history with undocumented Indonesians, as the purveyor of the gospel's good news who never got too involved with immigration issues, I wonder if I woke up from a deep spell of disbelief. Not about God, but about our ability to change anything. Or maybe it was about God. And my lack of faith was exactly that. Maybe I had never believed that God could change the heart of a legislator or a judge or a government agency, or that a protest in the rain could really make a kingdom-of-God kind of difference.

It had been easier for me to preach justice from the pulpit than to stand outside a town hall and shout for it. It had been easier for me to read about ICE arrests and lament them from a distance than it has been to access a detention center, find my way to a prison cell, stand beside one of my flock held captive in prison clothes, and pray with him. But that's the new norm. I go to prison because one of my congregants is caught up in legal limbo there.

And unexpectedly, for me, it is getting easier. It's starting to feel like there in prison, standing with the one seeking refuge who has been turned away, is exactly where I am meant to be. Because the One who offers refuge is already there.

I've asked longtime church members, who have watched the waves of Indonesian immigrants join our church over the decades, why our church has never taken action to offer sanctuary to them before or to intervene against deportations. A few say they tried but it was too late. Others say that those who are undocumented should know better and get their documents in order. Some argue that there is no need for us to act since one of our neighboring churches already provides sanctuary for anyone who needs it. Still others say, "We didn't know."

We didn't know who these people were. It wasn't until they had children here and raised them up in our schools—where they became best friends with our kids, sharing sports and homework and marching band together—that they became real people for us. Then they became one of us. Now that we know who they are, we know that what's happening is not fair. Dads are being taken away from their families. The breadwinner is arrested, the one who had the driver's license and paid the taxes. Now we scramble to help the wives and children who are left on their own to secure rent, rides, and food.

Roby's future is still unknown. There is only one thing I can say for certain: the Spirit came to our community one cold winter day and opened our eyes and warmed our hearts. The whole community gathered, church and town, in one galvanizing prayer vigil that woke up our sleepy Presbyterian church.

Today, we are prepared to move ahead, but it is unclear where to go. We wait for news from the courts. The national headquarters of our denomination has joined us in a postcard-writing campaign to legislators. We seek an immigration policy change and plead for Roby's release. We join the call to keep families together.

Roby remains in detention where we visit him, share communion, and pray. He tells me that he prays for all of us and for the ICE director in charge of his case as well. “I know he has a family, too,” Roby explains, “and maybe my prayer will change his heart, so that he might show mercy on me, another family man, and allow me to go back home to be with my wife and my children, to get my job back, and live my life.”

Awakened in faith, I pray these things for Roby too.

FOLLOWING UP (Updated December 27, 2018): Roby Sanger was released from detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement in November. His congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, New Jersey, had been working for his release during his ten months in custody. The congregation also raised more than \$27,000 to support Sanger’s wife and daughters, associate pastor Justin Karmann told Presbyterian News Service.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Injustice gets personal.”