

In congregations, fear, misinformation, and preparation after ICE policy change

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A sign regarding the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement is posted on the window of a corner store on January 20, in the predominantly Latino Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. (AP Photo/Erin Hooley)

By now, some 1 million TikTok users have viewed a video posted on the social media platform last week warning people away from the Manna Food Center distribution at Glenmont United Methodist Church, just outside the nation's capital in Maryland, claiming that the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency had been present there.

The problem: It isn't true.

Kelly Grimes, pastor of the multicultural church, which shares its sanctuary with Spanish- and French-speaking congregations, said that it took a few days to track down the truth: A man confessed he had spotted what he thought were unmarked law enforcement vehicles and panicked—he had no indication ICE had been there. Another man made the TikTok video, leaving Grimes and food distribution leaders to deal with the fear and fallout.

Grimes is one of several leaders of houses of worship who spoke to reporters about fighting misinformation about potential ICE raids, trying to walk with their congregants even as attendance is taking a hit.

The Trump administration has promised to end a policy preventing ICE from arresting immigrants at houses of worship, schools, and hospitals, but so far the only reported ICE arrest at a house of worship came Sunday during a worship service at Iglesia Fuente de Vida (Fountain of Life Church) in Tucker, Georgia, as the sermon was ending.

Wilson Velásquez, an asylum-seeker who entered the US in September 2022 with his wife and kids after facing threats from gangs in Honduras, was attending the church when his ICE ankle monitor began beeping, according to [*the Atlanta Journal-Constitution*](#). When he stepped outside to avoid disturbing the service, he was arrested by ICE agents.

ICE did not immediately respond to a request for information about why Velásquez was arrested. Besides Velásquez, at least 20 others were arrested in the Atlanta area Sunday, all of them asylum-seekers with ankle monitors who had arrived in the US between 2021 and 2023, according to Atlanta-area Spanish-language journalist Mario Guevara, who spoke to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Many of those arrested had valid work permits.

“We’re all in shock,” said Agustin Quiles, a director of community affairs and government relations for the Florida Fellowship of Hispanic Councils and Evangelical Institutions. Quiles said that his group was still working on a response, but that they were most concerned about children who would be impacted by the policy change.

“What are we going to do with the thousands of children that are left behind?” he asked.

Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, who advised President Donald Trump on immigration during his first term, said he had been assured by “those that know” that churches will not be raided by ICE and suggested that anyone arrested in a church would be “the worst of the worst.”

“ I’ve seen Tom (Homan) cry regarding the loss of immigrant lives, especially little kids,” Rodriguez said of the White House border czar’s “great heart.”

Rodriguez said that he is trying to address misinformation, as some pastors who are members of the NHCLC have reported lower Sunday attendance.

On Sunday at his own megachurch in Sacramento, California, Rodriguez assured attendees that ICE raids “will not happen in our church” and that, despite his media appearances supporting Trump’s actions against illegal immigration, “I do not need to know who is documented or undocumented.”

He added that he would continue to fight for a pathway to citizenship for “Dreamers,” people without legal status brought to the country as children, and to legalize “those who have been here for decades, those who have worked hard, who are not dependent on government subsidies, who have never even received a parking ticket, who love Jesus, and who love this country.”

Gabriel Salguero, president and founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, held a webinar Friday on Trump’s executive orders that was attended by 500 evangelical Christian leaders, a much higher turnout than NALEC webinars typically draw.

NALEC shared guidance, advising congregations to train a spokesperson to communicate clearly and respectfully to deescalate with ICE agents and to train children’s pastors on how to respond if a raid happens while children are separated from their parents for the service.

The group is also distributing “Know Your Rights” cards in multiple languages for congregants and teaching congregations themselves about their legal rights, clarifying that they have to allow ICE to enter into public worship spaces, even when they don’t have a warrant, but not church schools.

But Salguero said pastors' concerns don't stop at the church property line. "Even if there are not raids in churches, one of the concerns is that ICE agents will be parked near churches waiting," Salguero said.

Salguero also said that, in addition to supporting congregations, NALEC would continue its advocacy for immigration enforcement that targets violent criminals instead of families.

Five Quaker groups have taken a different tack, filing a [lawsuit](#) against the Department of Homeland Security and newly confirmed Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem over the change in the sensitive-locations policy. The suit charges that the court should declare unconstitutional any policy allowing immigration enforcement at or near houses of worship without strict limits. The groups argued that the policy change placed a substantial burden on their religious exercise.

Catholic bishops have made public statements in support of immigrants, advocating for policy changes and announcing that they are spreading know-your-rights information, but inquiries to diocesan offices about any further preparations were declined or went unanswered.

Imam Musa Kabba, who leads Masjid-ur-Rahmah, a large multicultural mosque in the Bronx with a majority West African immigrant population, said the mosque is educating immigrant members in their rights, but added: "We're praying to our creator, our God Allah. We pray more that he might protect us. He might show us a way to get out of this, all terrible."

Kabba is also advising his members to "do the right things," to continue going to the masjid and work. "We don't have any bad people in our mosque," he said, but, he acknowledged, "you can't stop the government."

Kabba is calling on the "good people who are close to" Trump to remind him of his immigrant roots in his own family and all of the immigrants who have come to the US because "their country is hard." "He might listen to them," he said.

Whether Trump will hear anything from his allies in Congress is unclear.

When [asked](#) by Migrant Insider, a Substack that reports on migration issues on Capitol Hill and the White House, whether churches should "be sanctuaries from

immigration agents,” several Democratic senators and Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski expressed support for the previous policy that had prevented arrests at churches. Five other Republican senators seemed to indicate that they needed to give the matter more thought, while others expressed strong support for the policy change.

Just across the border in Maryland, where Grimes is working to pick up the pieces from the TikTok misinformation, she emphasized that “the fear is real,” explaining her congregation knows those who have been detained who are in the country legally.

Grimes said “ As the United Methodist Church, we have social principles that welcome the stranger. So what ICE is doing, and especially their methodology, just totally goes against what we as the United Methodist Church believe.”

ICE is not welcome on her campus because “we’re following the mandate we’ve been given by Christ,” she said.

“There’s always going to be people who as soon as they hear ICE, they’re never going to that space again. And I don’t blame them,” she said. —Religion News Service