

Why are Trump and Musk blocking the church's work with refugees?

An administration that presents itself as the champion of beleaguered Christians is instead spreading lies about them.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

Not so long ago, helping refugees get settled was largely uncontroversial. Since World War II, the United States has distinguished between immigrants, who choose to leave their country, and refugees, who are forced to. In 1980, the Office of Refugee Resettlement was created by Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support. The ORR outsources its direct service work to ten nonprofit agencies, seven of which are faith-based.

This all came to an abrupt halt this winter with President Trump's flurry of aggressive executive orders. Along with closing the door to new refugees—that much was expected—[the White House cut off funding to the ten resettlement agencies](#), preventing them from honoring their commitments to refugees who have already arrived. (Update: On February 25, a federal judge [temporarily blocked this executive order](#).)

That assistance is essential but fairly modest: three months' help with basic living expenses. The resettlement program bears few marks of government excess or liberal ideology. It's a public-private partnership, not an elaborate federal bureaucracy. It does direct service, focused on basic human needs—not social engineering or systemic reform. Its function is not just humanitarian but also diplomatic. And it once enjoyed broad support among Christians of all stripes, who often volunteered through their churches to help out at the local level. Compassion for people forced into a tough situation used to be a matter of significant consensus.

But while Christians have long debated how best to help people, recently the debate has shifted to whether to do it at all. There are so many professed Christians who remain loyal to Trump even as he guts vital humanitarian programs. We won't challenge the authenticity of their faith; drawing a stark line between real Christians and fake ones is a fool's game and a vicious one. Still, it's hard not to hear the voice of Isaiah: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (5:20, NIV).

The Trump administration, alleged champion of beleaguered Christians, is using its power to block the church's work and its bully pulpit to undermine that work with false accusations. When Trump ally Michael Flynn said on X that Lutheran social service organizations are involved in "money laundering," self-dealing hatchet man Elon Musk chimed in and called the relevant federal funding "illegal payments." White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt claimed that cutting off funding to Catholic Charities was about combating "wokeness." Vice President Vance called refugees "illegal immigrants" and accused the Catholic Church of looking out only for its "bottom line." Every quote in this paragraph is a bald-faced lie.

Meanwhile, [the administration has authorized immigration arrests in churches](#), and its termination of foreign aid funding has stopped numerous faith-based humanitarian efforts in their tracks. Along with causing suffering and chaos, both moves directly affect the lives and work of a wide variety of Christians, not just liberal ones.

Trump and his loyalists enjoy significant support for their policies, including from self-identified Christians. But the implication that ending refugee resettlement work somehow represents Christian values should not be taken seriously. Here's what it does represent: corruption, obfuscation, malice toward vulnerable people, and a casual willingness to make a mockery of our faith.