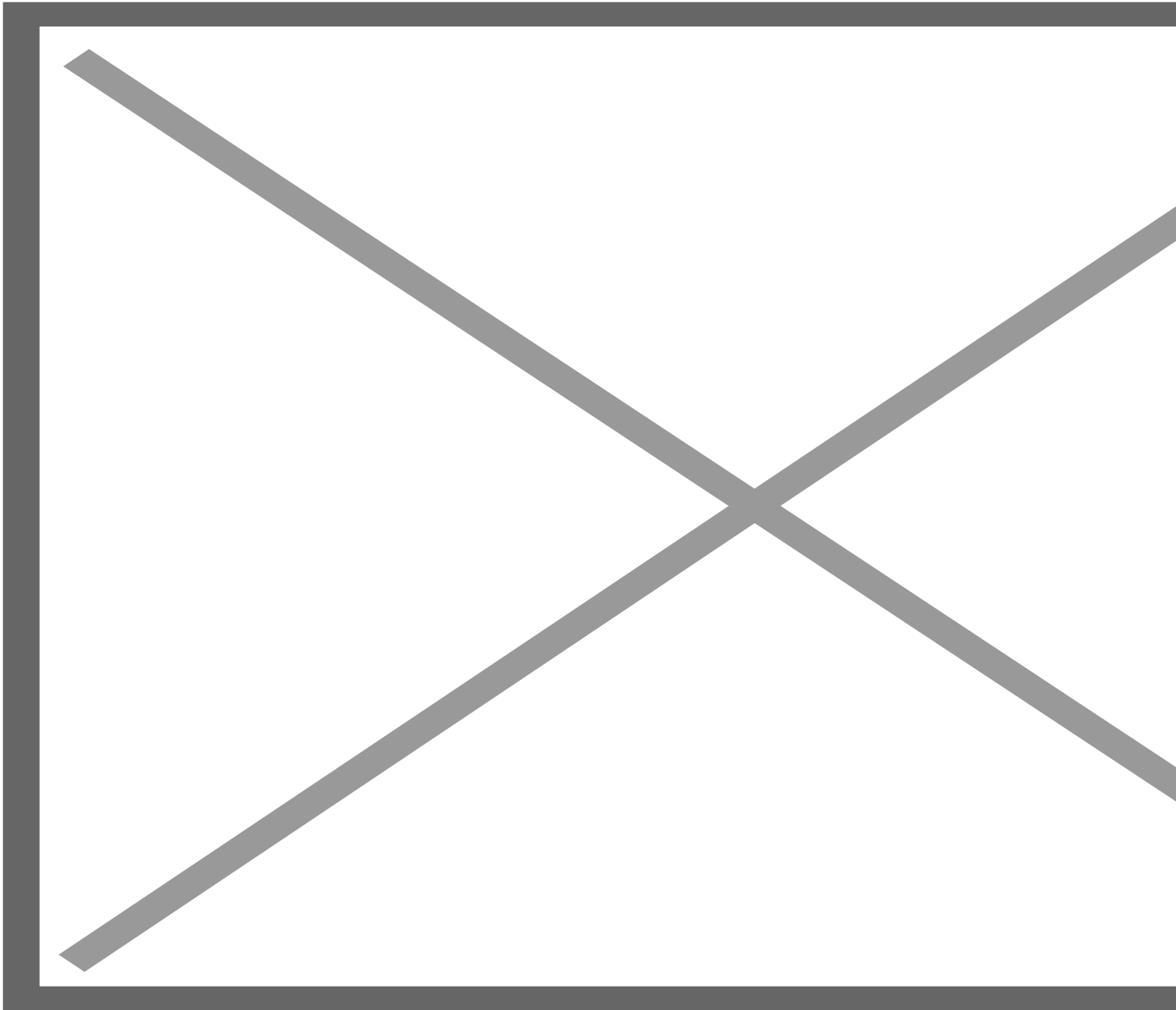


## Religious groups seek to prevent holiday immigration raids

by [Jeff Brumley](#)

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A courtroom in the US District Court in Massachusetts where religious groups have filed suit to prevent ICE raids in houses of worship over the holidays. (Courtesy photo)

A coalition of religious groups has asked a federal court to prevent federal immigration agents from raiding houses of worship during the holiday season.

The plaintiffs in *New England Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, et al., v. Department of Homeland Security, et al.* filed the [petition](#) amid swirling rumors and news reports that the US Department of Homeland Security has plans to apprehend worshipers in Spanish-speaking and other congregations during Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other holiday services in the coming weeks.

“If these reports are true, it is outrageous that the administration would so blatantly seek to undermine the freedom to worship freely as we enter an important time for many faiths,” said Skye Perryman, president of Democracy Forward, which serves as co-counsel in the action.

The possibility that raids could be carried out on church campuses and in sanctuaries creates even more urgency for the [lawsuit](#) on behalf of the Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches in the USA, Metropolitan Community Churches, and numerous Quaker and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America regions, Perryman said.

“The reports circulating this week are alarming and incompatible with our Constitution. We are taking swift action to ensure that the protections already recognized by the court are upheld and that faith communities can gather and worship, free from government coercion.”

The concern stems from the Trump administration’s January [termination](#) of longstanding federal prohibitions against immigration raids in sensitive locations such as churches, hospitals, and schools. Since then, federal agents have arrested undocumented immigrants on or near church properties, but incursions into sanctuaries and other buildings have not been reported.

Yet multiple religious groups have filed lawsuits similar to this one seeking to bar ICE and other agencies from such actions.

In their [action](#) filed in January, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship along with Sikh and Quaker groups were granted a temporary restraining order prohibiting ICE raids on member properties. Fellowship Southwest, now known as FaithWorks, the Hispanic Baptist Convention, and other groups were denied a restraining order in their separate [lawsuit](#) filed earlier this year.

Both social media and news accounts have been stoking fears that DHS plans to sweep through houses of worship during the holiday season. A [WhatsApp](#) message warning of impending church raids in Atlanta sparked apprehension in that city, while [reports](#) of federal officials briefing Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Jewish leaders of impending actions has raised concerns throughout New England.

“Two Hispanic pastors who lead Southern Baptist churches in New England say that SBC President Clint Pressley and its Executive Board received briefings on the plan and discussed it with Homeland Security Adviser Stephen Miller and White House Border Czar Tom Homan,” [This Week in Worcester](#) reported.

An SBC spokesperson said neither Pressley nor the executive committee have been briefed about planned ICE raids, according to the report.

A Hispanic Pentecostal pastor said his church had been visited several times by ICE and FBI agents, according to the publication, which cited unnamed DHS sources. “In all three conversations, agents asked questions about the names of specific congregation members, their home addresses and the frequency they attended church services.”

DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin denied the agency is targeting churches, according to the *National Catholic Reporter*: “ICE does not raid churches—regardless of if it is holiday season or not. This is just another

false narrative to try and demonize our brave ICE law enforcement who are facing a 1000% increase in assaults against them and a 8000% increase in death threats.”

However, the department [vowed](#) that no house of worship will be off limits thanks to President Donald Trump’s January directive opening health care, education, and sacred spaces to enforcement actions: “Criminals will no longer be able to hide in America’s schools and churches to avoid arrest. The Trump administration will not tie the hands of our brave law enforcement and instead trusts them to use common sense.”

But plaintiffs in the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* lawsuit are taking no chances. The notice they filed November 21 in US District Court in Massachusetts cites continued immigration enforcement actions at or near member facilities, including the presence of masked and armed agents in church parking lots and apprehensions being made on or near church properties.

The presence of immigration agents during the holiday season would be harmful to faith communities even if the reported raids do not occur, according to the filing. “Plaintiffs respectfully request the court’s prompt intervention to prevent serious and irreparable harm to worshippers’ ability to practice their faith in community with others during a time of such vital religious significance.”

Nationwide, religious leaders already are reporting [drops in church attendance](#) among Hispanic churchgoers because of fear of immigration raids. —Baptist News Global