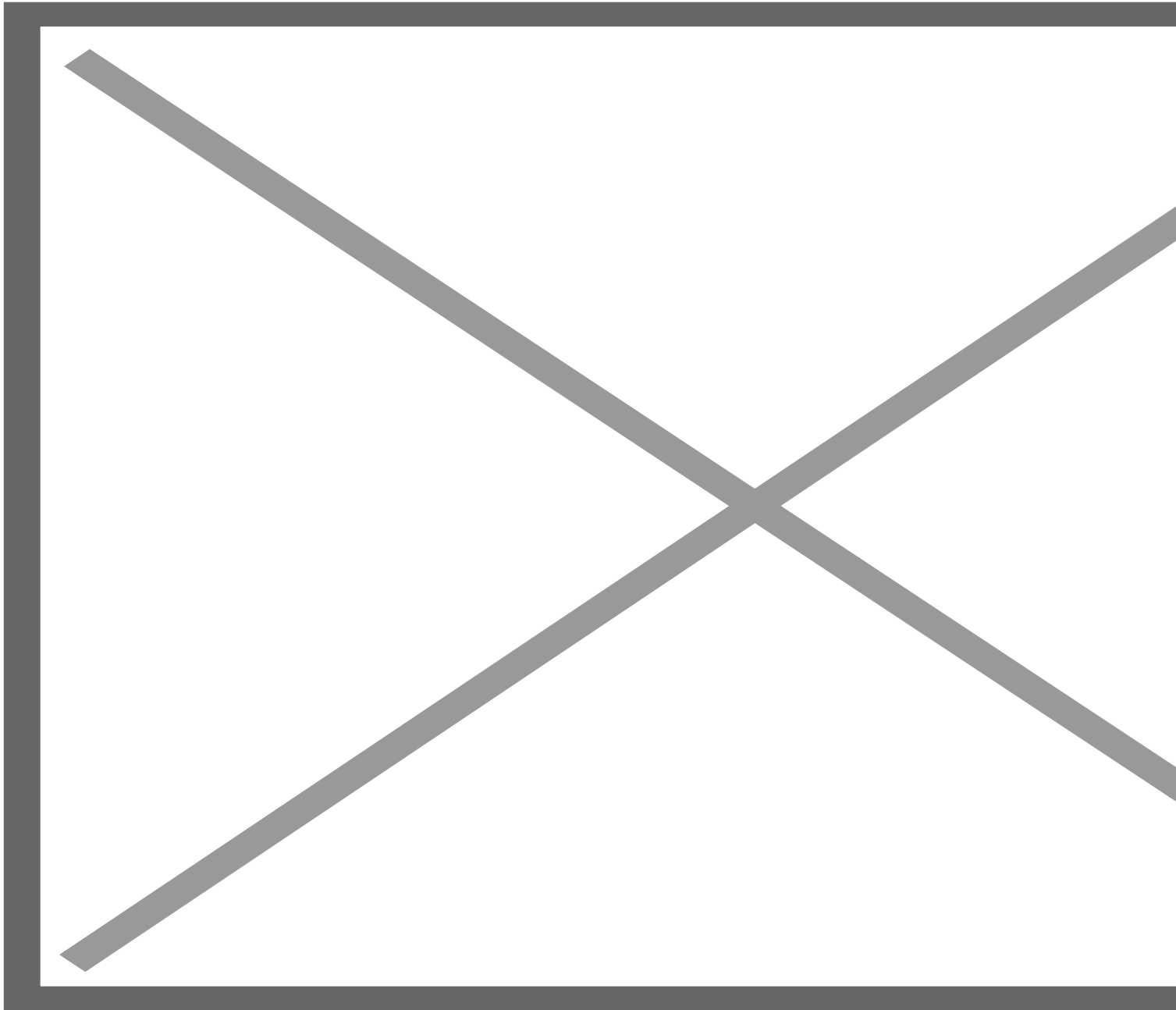


Released Texas pastors say immigration agents threatened family separation

by [Aleja Hertzler-McCain](#)

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Pastors Cinthia Sarai Cardona Otero, left, and Nepthali Zozaya Saucedo address their congregation on July 27 at Comunidad Cristiana Emanuel in Edinburg, Texas. (Photo courtesy of Comunidad Cristiana Emanuel)

With voices that cracked and a few tears on their cheeks, pastors Nepthali Zozaya Saucedo and Cinthia Sarai Cardona Otero led their Edinburg, Texas, congregation in praise for their recent release from immigration detention and prayer for those left behind.

“As the body of Christ, we can intercede, and not just for our family and friends, but also for people we maybe haven’t even seen, but who also endure pain, who also suffer injustice, who are also fighting to see the light of the sun again and have dignified food for themselves, a space to sleep and a space to be, and above all, a space to be reunited with their families,” said Zozaya in Spanish, during the July 26 worship service. He told those assembled he had promised cellmates the congregation’s prayers.

The assistant pastors at Comunidad Cristiana Emanuel, an Assemblies of God church, were released on Saturday, two days after immigration agents detained the married couple on their way to a retreat with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. It was their first time away from their three children, and Cardona said the trip represented “a dream” for them.

The worship service and the livestreamed press conference that followed revealed new details about threats immigration agents allegedly made to coerce the couple to sign voluntary departure papers and included a notably united show of force backing the couple’s release.

Sandy Ovalle, a board member with the Latino Christian National Network, thanked a diverse group of organizations and individuals for supporting the couple, including the three major national organizations representing Latino evangelicals in political advocacy—which rarely work together—and a Democrat and Republican in Congress.

Several Assemblies of God pastors who were present, including Zozaya, who has served Comunidad Cristiana Emanuel over a decade, also prayed for God to intervene for a more just immigration policy and called for the faithful to help accomplish that goal. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin is a member of an Assemblies of God church, and nearly 9 in 10 members of the Assemblies of God [voted](#) for President Donald Trump in 2024.

In a statement, a Department of Homeland Security spokesperson said that Zozaya and Cardona had overstayed a visa that expired in 2022 and that the married couple were detained on separate days—Cardona on Thursday and Zozaya on Friday. Faith leaders supporting the couple disputed that account, saying that the two had valid religious worker visas and that were both detained on Thursday in the early morning.

DHS also said that Zozaya and Cardona “were released on Alternatives to Detention and are required to report in person to the Harlingen Field Office in 6 months and call in once a month. All of their claims will be heard by a Justice Department immigration judge and they will receive full due process.”

At the Sunday press conference, Cardona said that the couple were “prepared” to demonstrate their migration status with their documents when they went to the airport. “Our intention—from the moment God brought us to this country—has been to honor him and obey the laws,” she said through tears.

Her husband later added, “Our desire has never been to serve ourselves from this nation, but, quite the opposite, to serve this country with devotion and effort because we have been called to the families of this country and this community.”

On Friday, while in detention, Zozaya had spoken on the phone to reporters, saying that the couple had been “pressured” with prolonged separation from their children—a seven-year-old and nearly three-year-old twins—to sign voluntary departure papers. On Sunday, Cardona, fighting back tears, described in detail the repeated attempts she alleged immigration agents made to coerce them into signing papers: that they would be deported separately to different third countries, not their home in Mexico; that they could not make calls without signing the papers; and that they would face up to six months of incarceration without their sons.

A spokesperson from DHS said, “It is categorically false we would pressure someone to self-deport. The Trump Administration is utilizing all lawful options to carry out the largest deportation operation in history, just as President Trump promised.”

Cardona also described a 2 a.m. interrogation, separate from her husband, in which agents “cursed” at her. She also said agents mocked her.

“The first time I went up to an agent, for a moment I felt peace because (they) began to mention the Bible to me, but then (they) began to mock me, because (they) said ‘You Christians think that you can put God before everything and disobey the laws,’” she said, adding that her attempts to explain herself met no success.

After the final threat about separation from their sons, Cardona said the two signed the papers. According to a member of their support team, that detail had not been revealed in Friday’s press conference because agents had disclosed there was a process to revoke the signatures, which the couple did. Cardona attributed that moment, and their eventual release, to divine intervention—“God is doing something because this is not normal,” she said.

But the pressure to sign the voluntary departure papers continued, even after the signatures had been officially revoked, Cardona said, with agents warning they would face “charges” for revoking them.

At one point, Cardona said that an agent admitted to her that the agent found “their misfiled documents,” but Cardona did not explain whether that led to the couple’s release. National press were not given an opportunity to ask questions during Sunday’s press conference, and faith leaders supporting the couple have declined to elaborate on the couple’s legal status.

Speaking publicly Sunday, Cardona and Zozaya emphasized God’s role in their release and said they drew comfort from their faith and from the Bible.

Cardona asked their congregation to sing with her and Zozaya the melody that resonated in their minds during detention. “In the storm, you give me calm. Nothing will stop your faithfulness,” the couple sang in Spanish.

Octavio Luna and Sarai Martinez Luna, a married couple who are senior pastors at Comunidad Cristiana Emanuel, led prayers of thanksgiving for God’s role in their release and for the many who advocated for Zozoya and Cardona’s release. Martinez later said, “we broke barriers, and we united.”

Ovalle and Martinez mentioned support from the Texas Gulf Hispanic District of the Assemblies of God, Urban Strategies, the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, Conexión Pastoral, Border Perspective, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, the Connected Americans initiative, the Latino Christian National Network, Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Texas), Rep. Monica De La Cruz (R-Texas), and Democrat Bobby Pulido, the Tejano musician running to unseat De La Cruz.

Rick Reyes, vice superintendent of the Texas Gulf Hispanic District and lead pastor at Templo Bethel in Pharr, Texas, led a prayer for government authorities. In introducing the prayer, Reyes noted a call to pray for those in authority, as well as the human errors those in authority can make.

“They are clay vessels that on some occasions also intentionally go past what is just, go past what is honest, go past what is right. We pray, Lord, that you touch their lives. We pray, Lord, that you touch their hearts,” he said, praying for officials at every level, from the White House to local communities.

Zozaya also prayed for immigration agents. “We know that some of them are also hurt to see this situation. I pray that you put in them a heart like yours so that everyone who is there in those detention centers is treated with dignity.”

Ultimately, Zozaya concluded the press conference with a call for the whole church to continue to unite to support immigrants—“those who have been deprived of their liberty, those who are separated from their loved ones, those who are facing such difficult moments like we lived these past days,” he said.

“With this we finish,” Zozaya said to the press, his voice still breaking. “Yes, we understood that our responsibility in this country would be big. Today, having seen the miracle of God in our lives, we understood it is something even bigger,” he said, making a public commitment to serve those “without a voice” and those “without hope.” —Religion News Service