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[Good Weekend](#)

Lawyers, warrants, sermons: How churches became the final frontier in Trump's deportation plan

American churches have long offered sanctuary to undocumented migrants, but US President Donald Trump's threat to deport millions of them – and his administration's warning that houses of worship will no longer be immune from immigration agent raids – has religious institutions on high alert.

By **Liz Gooch**
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New York's Reverend Lea Matthews calls the Trump administration's decision to make churches legitimate targets for immigration enforcement a "gut punch". *CREDIT: BEN SKLAR*

You can't miss the sign on the front door of a church that has towered over a corner block in New York's Upper West Side for more than a century. "ICE and Homeland Security cannot enter without a warrant signed by a judge," reads the black type on laminated white paper.

On an icy winter's morning, church staff quickly usher people in through the heavy wooden door. Reverend Lea Matthews doesn't want anyone waiting out on the street.

As weak sunlight filters through stained-glass windows and people settle into the pews with plates of food and steaming cups of coffee, the reverend picks up a microphone. But there'll be no sermon today. Standing beneath the altar, where a gold cross sits between two candles, Matthews, dressed in a purple hoodie and jeans, welcomes everyone to St Paul and St Andrew United Methodist Church.

Shortly after a volunteer translates her message into Spanish, arms start going up in the pews. The questions begin. Is it safe to show up to hearings at immigration courts? To send our kids to school? To come to church? "You could go to the grocery store, you could go to the laundry, it could happen anytime," a Nigerian woman says. "We don't know whether to hide on the subway or in a tunnel."

Matthews didn't know if people would show up today or whether fear would keep them away. She stuck the sign on the church door three days before US President Donald Trump took office and immediately began taking steps to deliver on his promise to carry out the largest mass deportation in US history. But people began arriving as soon as she opened the doors at 7.30am.



The warning sign on Matthews' church's door. *CREDIT: LIZ GOOCH*

Mothers pushing prams or carrying toddlers bundled up in coats and beanies against sub-zero temperatures, older women on their own, a scattering of men.

They're here for "Miracle Monday", when the cavernous church transforms into a bustling drop-in service where immigrants can pick up breakfast and donated clothes, and seek advice from lawyers and non-profit groups. This morning, as toddlers play with blocks at the back of the church, mothers and fathers learn how to create a power of attorney and guardianship orders to designate who will be responsible for their children if they are detained. They sit beside lawyers and trained volunteers, some wearing purple T-shirts with #ResistanceisHoly printed across the back. They discuss scenarios such as, "If you're arrested at 10am, who will pick your child up from school?"

Churches have long provided shelter and sanctuary for the waves of immigrants who have washed into the US. Places of worship – and schools and hospitals – were considered "sensitive sites" that were off-limits to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents seeking undocumented immigrants. But a [directive](#) issued on Trump's first day in office declared that would no longer be the case. "It was a gut punch," says Matthews. "It flew in the face of centuries of tradition that honours houses of worship as places of refuge."

The US has recorded its [largest immigration surge](#) in history in recent years. In response, progressive faith leaders have helped people apply for asylum, accompanied them to court hearings, and helped them find jobs and housing. Some churches, including Matthews', have offered physical shelter, setting up beds in places usually reserved for prayer. From New York to Texas, where a woman and her child lived in a church for almost eight years, they've become vital allies for immigrant communities.



Lea Matthews (right) at her church's Miracle Monday fair that offers help and advice to immigrants. *CREDIT: JESSE RYLANDER/VIA*

Now, as the Trump administration carries out highly publicised raids across the US and deportation flights, including sending some people to Guantanamo Bay, church leaders say they're swamped with pleas for help from communities plagued by fear. It's forcing pastors to consider how far they're willing to go to resist deportation efforts and act as a buffer between authorities and an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants.

But they've been gearing up for this moment, attending legal briefings and devising plans in case immigration agents show up. They say they will not abandon what they believe is their Christian duty to help society's most vulnerable, even if it could put them on a collision course with authorities. "We are ready and prepared to do what we can to serve," says Matthews, 47. "We're not trying to break any law. We are just trying to continue to follow Jesus and live out the gospel."

From racial segregation to the Vietnam War and the Black Lives Matter movement, the US has a long history of clergy speaking out against laws and

policies they perceive to be unjust. Trump had only been back in the White House for one night before coming face to face with a church leader who continued this tradition.

As the president sat in the front row of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., Bishop Mariann E. Budde made a direct plea from the pulpit, beseeching him to “have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now”, including immigrants and transgender children. The bishop, the leader of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, asked Trump to have mercy “on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here”.

The president bit back with a scathing rebuke. Trump, who a day earlier had declared that he had been “saved by God to make America great again”, called the bishop “nasty”, and “not compelling or smart”. He demanded an apology, saying [in a post on Truth Social](#) that she had “brought her church into the world of politics in a very ungracious way”.



Bishop Mariann E. Budde with Trump, whom she challenged to “have mercy” on those who were frightened. *CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES*

The bishop has since been lauded a hero by progressive Christians and cast as a villain by conservative elements who’ve been credited with helping Trump get re-elected. Republican congressman Mike Collins said Budde, who was

born in New Jersey, should be “added to the deportation list”. [Police have said](#) they’re investigating threatening phone calls she received. The whole episode would perhaps make a fitting epilogue to the bishop’s 2023 book, *How We Learn to Be Brave: Decisive Moments in Life and Faith*.

Now, amid daily reports of immigration raids and deportation flights, other Christian leaders are confronting their own decisive moments. For some, that may mean butting up against the highest office in the land in order to stay true to what they see as their responsibility to a higher power. “We are very much in danger of losing the US soul,” says Reverend Juan Carlos Ruiz, a pastor at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Brooklyn. “There’s a higher moral, spiritual law than the laws that are being implemented.”

Juan Carlos Ruiz is a hard man to catch. His days can start at 4.30am, his phone’s mailbox is always full, and since Trump took office he has been even busier than usual. I’d been trying to reach him for about a week, when my phone buzzes at 1.30am on a Thursday in late January. His text message says to meet him at his church later on that day.



Brooklyn Reverend Juan Carlos Ruiz loading up his van with supplies for immigrants. *CREDIT: LIZ GOOCH*

When he steps out of his white van hours later, Ruiz is wearing a long cream cardigan and taupe trousers, his grey beard neatly trimmed. He stops as two

young women approach him on the footpath in front of his church. One of the women has a baby strapped to her chest. Their friend has told them to come and see him about their asylum application.

The 55-year-old married pastor began helping immigrants not long after arriving in the US from his native Mexico nearly four decades ago. He says he's never seen people as scared as they are now. His barber, who has applied for asylum, is no longer opening his shop because his customers, mostly undocumented immigrants, have stopped showing up. People living in shelters keep asking Ruiz to help them find somewhere else to stay because they're afraid there could be raids. "There's this palpable fear," he says. "They are afraid and trying to become less visible."

In [his inauguration speech](#) in January, Trump promised to deport "millions and millions of criminal aliens". Record numbers of people have crossed the southern US border in recent years, with [government data](#) showing a rise from 1.7 million in 2021 to more than 2.4 million in 2023. That number declined to 2.1 million last year.

Cracking down on illegal immigration was a central plank of Trump's election campaign, which he littered with derogatory rhetoric blaming immigrants for America's decline. In one of his most sensational, unfounded claims, [he asserted](#) that Haitian immigrants had been eating cats and dogs in Springfield, Ohio.

Authorities deported 37,660 people during Trump's first month in office, according to government data cited by [Reuters](#), which said the figure was far less than the monthly average of 57,000 during the last year of the Biden administration. A senior Trump administration official told Reuters that deportations were set to rise in coming months.

The [Department of Homeland Security](#) launched a multimillion-dollar ad campaign in February, warning people in the country illegally to leave the US or face deportation and never be permitted to return. Authorities have said they are targeting people with criminal convictions and those who present a national security threat.

But asked whether undocumented immigrants could also be arrested in churches and schools, Tom Homan, Trump's "border tsar", [told CNN](#): "If they're in this country illegally, they've got a problem. It's not OK to enter this country illegally, it's a crime."

While critics blame Trump for whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment, a [New York Times poll](#) conducted in January found 55 per cent of those surveyed either strongly, or somewhat support, deporting all undocumented immigrants, while 87 per cent support deporting those with criminal records.



President Donald Trump has promised the largest deportation program in American history. *CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES*

Ruiz knows what it's like to be undocumented in the US. He entered the country with a visa in 1986, but stayed on after it expired so that he could be with his parents, who'd made the move a year earlier. He says a Catholic Church helped him when he first arrived. He became a US citizen in 2001. "The church, right from the beginning, was the one who gave me sanctuary," says Ruiz. He's been paying it forward ever since.

Just inside the church's red front doors, boxes of avocados are stacked in the foyer. Spanish and English stickers are plastered on the walls. One reads: *NO KIDS IN CAGES*. We head into a large room adjacent to the main part of the church. Ruiz explains this is where they set up camp beds in 2022, when the Texas governor sent busloads of immigrants to New York.

As the city struggled to cope with the influx, churches like Ruiz's opened their doors. Some nights, he says, they had as many as 50 people sleeping here. The beds spilled into the main part of the church, and they had to move the pews aside to make more room. He describes it as "holy chaos". Some 300 men,

women and children stayed over the course of six months, the last of whom left in January 2023.

Lately, as he's been inundated with requests from people wanting to move out of shelters, Ruiz has been asking New Yorkers to host people in their homes. About a dozen people, whom he describes as "ordinary folk", have already taken in immigrants. "We have that line of defence, of people shielding people in their homes," he says. "We have a whole network of sanctuary spaces throughout the nation and people who are stepping up to the plate to respond."

Another pastor, who runs a small independent, non-denominational church out of his home, tells *Good Weekend* a dozen asylum seekers are living in his basement. One man has been there for 15 months. Emphasising that he's "not against the government", the pastor says he will not stop providing shelter to those in need. "These are people who need help, they need a place to stay."

Ruiz is on a tight schedule, so we hop in his van and head to an industrial area of Brooklyn. His first stop is a warehouse, where a community group gives out food donated by supermarkets that's close to its expiry date. "We've got tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, yoghurt, chicken, frozen ravioli," says the young man in charge of the food pantry. "We'll take it all, whatever you can give us," Ruiz tells him.

The pastor and a volunteer heave 22-kilogram bags of carrots into the back of his van, sacks of onions and potatoes, crates of milk, boxes of fruit and vegetables. An edible Tetris that reaches the van's roof. "We'll give it all out today," says Ruiz. About 1000 families come to his church throughout the week to collect fresh food and hot meals. Ruiz helps them with their asylum applications and accompanies them to court hearings when their cases come before a judge.



Ruiz expects everything in his fully loaded vehicle to be given out the same day. *CREDIT: LIZ GOOCH*

Our next stop is a two-storey building on a residential street lined with trees stripped bare of leaves. Ruiz has arranged for a 50-year-old man from Ecuador to meet a real estate agent who has an apartment for rent. The man, who agrees to speak anonymously, has been living in a shelter with his wife and three children since arriving in New York a year ago. Despite being granted permission to stay and work in the US while their asylum claim is processed, he fears they could be detained and deported if authorities raid the shelter.

The man says he and his wife felt they had no choice but to leave their home in Ecuador after gang members began demanding their 17-year-old son work for them. At first, the father kept them at bay by paying bribes. Then the kidnapping threats started. Gang members would phone, saying they were watching his children, the youngest of whom is now five years old. They would describe the clothes his kids were wearing, the school they were attending. "They would say, 'We are watching, so you better pay,'" he says.

Fearing their children could be kidnapped, the family set off by bus, taking only what they could carry. They travelled through Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. When they walked across the US border, the man says they handed themselves in to border guards. After 20 days in detention, they were released and travelled on to New York.

The man now works for a charity that supports immigrants, his wife has found a job in a bakery and his children are in school. “They are really worried,” he says. “On TikTok, they heard the president has given the green light for people to go into schools and churches.” He’s always on the lookout for immigration officers when he heads into a subway station or attends church. “People are really afraid of coming to church now,” he says.

In late January, ICE agents arrested a Honduran man outside a church in Georgia, according to [news reports](#). Ruiz fears it’s only a matter of time before more arrests are made near churches. “I’m afraid that’s going to be our daily bread and that we need to keep organising and fight back,” he says. Ruiz does not believe the people who come to his church are criminals. “Many of the people who are coming here are fleeing really violent conditions,” he says. “Many didn’t want to come, but they were forced to. Many people don’t have much option but to transgress the borders. Whether we like it or not, this country stands for a better future for those families who are fleeing untold dangers.”

Ruiz says that if immigration officers arrive at his church, he’ll ask to see a warrant naming the individual they are seeking. “If the person is there, I’ll bring the person out,” he says. “If they want to come into the church itself, I will not let them because we believe they are sacred spaces.”

At Matthews’ church on the Upper West Side, staff have been instructed to ask ICE agents for a signed warrant and to phone the senior pastor and the church’s lawyer. “We wouldn’t welcome them in, we don’t want them in the building,” Matthews says.



Illegal immigrants have been crossing America's southern border in record numbers in recent years. *CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES*

The church would also alert a network of community groups that are committed to providing a “non-violent rapid response” should immigration agents come to the church or the neighbourhood. “People would come to bear witness and to stand with those being targeted,” Matthews says.

Lawyers say despite the change in policy, faith leaders can still refuse entry to an immigration officer if the officer does not have a judicial warrant. Alina Das, co-director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic at New York University, has held legal briefings for various religious groups. She says faith leaders can also ask immigration agents to leave public events that take place on private property if they do not have a judicial warrant.

In 2023, Das helped obtain a settlement for four women who faced retaliation after seeking sanctuary in churches to avoid deportation. The women were granted temporary protection from deportation for three years.

While the law allows faith leaders to provide their services to everyone, irrespective of immigration status, Das says there is a fear that they could face prosecution if they do not cede to authorities' requests. “I think what

everyone is afraid of is that even things that are clearly lawful activity could still be prosecuted as unlawful activity,” says Das. “That’s the chilling effect of this new policy.”

There are already signs of a fightback. [In late February](#), a judge temporarily blocked immigration agents from carrying out enforcement operations in houses of worship for Quakers and several other religious groups while their lawsuit is heard. In a separate case, more than two dozen Christian and Jewish groups last month filed a lawsuit in the US District Court in Washington challenging Trump’s attempt to give ICE agents the power to enter and make arrests in houses of worship. “We cannot worship freely if some of us are living in fear,” Reverend Sean Rowe, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, told the Associated Press. “By joining this lawsuit, we’re seeking the ability to gather and fully practise our faith, to follow Jesus’ command to love our neighbours as ourselves.”

St Paul and St Andrew United Methodist Church has never hidden its efforts to shield immigrants. In 2018, Matthews and other church leaders held a press conference to announce that they were providing shelter to Debora Barrios-Vasquez, a Guatemalan woman who was facing deportation and separation from her two children.



Debora Barrios-Vasquez, living in the US illegally, took refuge in Lea Matthews’ New York church for 15 months. *CREDIT: CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES*

Barrios-Vasquez, who was arrested during a routine traffic stop, had applied for asylum in the US when she arrived 13 years earlier. But her application

was denied after she failed to show up for a court hearing. She had been unaware of the hearing because a letter notifying her of the court date was sent to an old address, says Matthews.

Barrios-Vasquez had married and had two children, who were US citizens, by the time she was served a deportation order. “She needed a safe place to stay so that she would not be separated from her kids,” Matthews says. “We absolutely felt that it was not only a call from Debora but from God.”

Barrios-Vasquez moved into the church with her children, then aged two and nine, and stayed for 15 months, until she was granted a temporary stay order in 2019. She has since found work and her case is still before the courts. The church’s next guests arrived in 2022, as New York struggled to cope with the massive influx of immigrants sent from Texas. “When the buses started coming, people were on the streets without beds,” says Matthews. Over the next 13 months, about 20 men from countries including Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia slept at the church, usually staying in groups of five. Church members helped them apply for asylum, find jobs and housing.

Matthews says they would not hesitate to have immigrants sleep at the church again. “I think we’re staying open to everything. That is definitely on the table, should that need arise from our community members,” she says.

Warm and engaging, Matthews is the second openly queer female pastor at her church, whose stated mission is to “build a community of radical welcome that follows Jesus into the streets of New York City”. A rainbow banner with the words “Love in Action” adorns one of the church doors.

But Matthews, who lives with her wife and daughter, hasn’t always been welcomed with open arms by members of the Christian faith. When she came out as a teenager in the late 1990s, the Baptist church she grew up attending in Mississippi told her she could no longer continue training to become a youth leader. “I was told there was no place in the church for me,” she recalls. In recent years, however, the church has welcomed her back twice to deliver sermons.

She’s adamant that churches must continue to be places of refuge. But she recognises that supporting immigrants under the current administration may not be without risk. “It would be naive to not be afraid, most importantly for those we serve, who are the ones at greatest risk,” she says. “Still, I couldn’t

sleep at night if I somehow tried to compartmentalise my faith from my public work and action, so I'm just trying to do the next right thing as I prayerfully discern it, and right now, it's to continue the work."

For now, that means keeping the doors open, providing practical and emotional support, and staying alert for news of possible raids.

At the church's recent Miracle Monday, the crowd begins to thin after a couple of hours. Volunteers have cleared away the empty food trays, people have visited the clothing room to collect donated coats and shoes, and toddlers are beginning to tire. A little boy lies across one of the church pews, watching a cartoon on his mother's phone.

Before the session comes to a close, Matthews and several volunteers unfold donated prams and line them up beneath the altar. Using a lottery system, they call out the winning numbers in Spanish, and women come forward to select a pram. One woman's winter coat barely stretches around her pregnant belly.

An older Nigerian woman sits alone in a pew, watching on. She came to the US five years ago on a tourist visa and decided to stay to try to make some money to send back to her family. When a lawyer sits down beside her and explains what she should do if stopped by an immigration officer, she listens intently. "I was scared coming today, but I forced myself," she says.

After the lawyer moves on and the last of the prams are wheeled away, the 62-year-old woman wants to know, "What if ICE are waiting for us outside?"

Minutes later, as if on cue, Matthews makes an announcement over the microphone: "If you'd like somebody to walk with you for two blocks outside this building, just come over here. We have somebody willing to walk with you."

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