News



Parishioners pray and meditate at San Fernando Cathedral, May 8 in San Antonio. (AP/Eric Gay)

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At Celebration Church, a Portuguese- and English-speaking Baptist congregation in the Boston area, the benevolence fund is supposed to be there to help church families meet basic needs, such as food, clothing and heat, throughout the year. But in April, three months into President Donald Trump's campaign to deport immigrants, the money had already been almost completely spent.

"If a family member has been detained, the church tries to mobilize to help the families in need," said Celebration's pastor, Josias Souza, adding that many other immigrant congregants are afraid to show up to work. "If a person doesn't work, they don't get paid," Souza said.

At Our Family, a multilingual church in the Orlando, Florida, area, the Rev. Lecio Dornas, lead pastor to the church's Brazilian members, said fear of raids at workplaces or of being stopped while commuting has been the biggest impact of the crackdown on his community, too.

According to Dornas, the resulting hit on members' incomes both lowers offerings and creates greater need for assistance.

As their congregants live in fear of being detained and deported, pastors of churches serving immigrant populations across the country are not only searching for ways to reassure their congregations, but how to care for them and sustain their churches financially.

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At the oldest standing house of worship in Texas, San Antonio's Catholic San Fernando Cathedral, the rector, Fr. Carlos Velázquez, said the tension over potential detention or deportation is thought to have caused lower attendance at Fiesta San Fernando, part of an annual citywide festival, Fiesta San Antonio, that dates to 1891.

" We're attributing (that to) the fact that people don't want to go out right now," Velázquez said. "They're scared." The people who did come out spent less, which Velázquez attributes to their economic uncertainty.

The 287-year-old cathedral stands about three blocks from the U.S. Justice Department's San Antonio Immigration Court, where immigrants' deportation cases are increasingly being dismissed at the behest of government lawyers, allowing them to be detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement for expedited removal outside the courtroom. (The archdiocese is working to inform immigrants of their right to request a virtual hearing to remove the risk of an ICE arrest at court.)

Normally one of the year's biggest fundraisers, Fiesta San Fernando came up short, and Velázquez said he will probably defer maintenance on the 22-year-old building he lives in, where moisture is creating cracks in the roofline. " It's pretty major, but it's something that we're going to have to put aside," he said.

At St. Thomas the Apostle, one of the largest Catholic parishes in Los Angeles, the pastor, Fr. Mario Torres, decided to postpone the parish's early July St. Thomas fiesta to early September because about half of those he spoke to said they were scared to attend.



Fr. Mario Torres (RNS/Courtesy photo)

Torres preaches to nearly 10,000 families at Mass most weekends. "Even though it's a difficult time, let's not allow the fear to control us," he said he tells them during homilies, where he has drawn on Jesus' words, "peace be with you."

But he said that the festival is different from Mass. “"Here in the church, I could protect you," Torres said. "For example, if ICE shows up at the church, I could close the doors, and I don't think they'll come in."

Amid the carnival rides, “outside, I can’t really protect you,” he said, imagining ICE could carry out detentions without him even being aware.

Torres said he isn't worried about the church's finances because "poor people are the ones that are the most generous." The priest said he is telling families to "pray for those who have more fear than you" and help those they know in need. "Don't be selfish," he said he has instructed, citing Jesus' teachings. "Somebody else is being affected. You have to support that person, help that person."

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Pastor Sergio Elias of the Brazilian Free Methodist Church in Connecticut said the emotional strain on congregations is a major issue, even as leaders provide pastoral care.

"We have people who are locked in their homes out of fear, or only leaving to go to work. No leisure, no outings with their families, no vacations — sometimes not even coming to church. … They are terrified," he said.

The immigrant experience, especially as immigrants seek legal status, has never been easy. "The fear of deportation has always been part of the undocumented immigrant experience, even under other administrations," Elias said.

"But what makes the current moment unique is how openly and aggressively the Trump administration has approached the issue as an explicit political platform," he said. "Before, deportations happened, but without this tone of declared targeting. This posture has quietly legitimized hostile attitudes among people who already held anti-immigrant views, making everyday discrimination more common."



Masked federal agents wait outside an immigration courtroom on July 8 in New York. (AP/Olga Fedorova)

Pastor Manoel Oliveira of New Life Church in Massachusetts pointed out that even immigrants with legal status are affected. "It's not just undocumented immigrants who are being impacted emotionally. Those who have documents often have a friend or family member who doesn't, and they share in that suffering," he said.

The Rev. Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said pastors in Florida have reported cases of longtime members of their congregations who have no criminal records and deep ties to their communities being detained and deported, including a small-group leader in her 60s, a worship team guitarist, the wife of a pastor, parents of young children and many others.

These are people who attend immigration hearings to regularize their status, Salguero said. "While we support due process and the deportation of violent criminals, we oppose this indiscriminate approach that targets mothers, elders and faith leaders. We are concerned that there are still some apologists who continue to

say that's not happening when we know it is happening, and we've seen it."

Agustín Quiles, president of Mission Talk and board member of the Fraternidad de Concilios y Entidades Evangélicas, based in Florida, said many pastors themselves "are going to need counseling on how to deal with so many broken families and even with the law."

He adds: "It's real pain. Some pastors are describing heartbreaking scenes of children screaming scared, and homemaker mothers left to care for their children alone, without a source of income or community stability."

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Amid the crisis, there is growing frustration among Latinos with the broader evangelical establishment.

"There's a sense of abandonment from the white evangelical community," Quiles said. "The councils and denominations are growing because of the membership numbers that come from the Latino church, yet they are silent, turning their backs to their Latino Christian sisters and brothers. We need to find a bridge there. There should not be two different gospels."

Quiles said the moment demands unity. "There are a lot of heroes on the ground," Quiles said. "The Latino church is vibrant and rising, and these leaders and communities are at the forefront, thinking creatively on how to protect their immigrants, how to serve their immigrants despite the threats that are coming from this administration."

What has been helping Dornas get through this situation, said the Florida pastor, is the strong sense of solidarity in his Brazilian community. His congregants are raising funds to help pay bills and buy medication for those in need — even buying plane tickets for those who, out of fear, choose to return to their countries of origin.

"Solidarity requires effort and sacrifice," Dornas said. "Either we do it, or no one will."