News



The Rev. Oona Casanova Vazquez, lead pastor of the South Bay Church of the Nazarene in Torrance, stands outside Santa Ana Immigration Court during a prayer vigil for immigrants in Santa Ana, Calif., July 31, 2025. (AP Photo/Deepa Bharath)

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Santa Ana, Calif. — August 8, 2025

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Outside a Southern California immigration court, the Rev. Oona Casanova Vazquez sat beside a nervous Peruvian national as he waited for a judge to call his name — talking, smiling, even handing him a mint.

Vazquez, lead pastor of the South Bay Church of the Nazarene in Torrance, has been spending her Thursdays this summer with other faith leaders and church volunteers observing court proceedings and handing out leaflets about the Trump administration's immigration enforcement.

"I come here to stand and bear witness to these people who have more courage than I have," she said. "They walk through these doors knowing they could be detained. I'm here to offer them strength and to let them know they are valued and prayed over."

Since early June, the Trump administration has significantly ramped up immigration arrests and raids, especially in Southern California, taking people into custody at businesses, farms and public spaces like parking lots. Fear has spread in the region's immigrant communities, especially among those without legal status.

Many faith leaders and groups — including the Catholic Church, which has millions of adherents in the region — have come out in support. While clergy in collars have registered a moral presence and show of support in the courts, numerous churches and nonprofits have mobilized to deliver food and medicine to those afraid to leave their homes.

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Some churches are offering rent assistance to members who have lost or quit their jobs out of fear. Congregations are streaming worship services so people won't need to take a risk by coming to services, which are no longer immune from immigration raids.

Department of Homeland Security officials have maintained there will be no safe spaces for those who are in the country illegally, have committed crimes, or tried to undermine immigration enforcement. They have consistently said their efforts are intended to safeguard public safety and national security.

People in the country illegally can avoid arrest by taking the government's offer of $1,000 and a free flight to their home country, said department spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin.

"We encourage every person here illegally to use the CBP Home app and take advantage of this offer and preserve the opportunity to come back to the U.S. the right legal way to live the American dream," she said.

Offering support in immigration court

Clergy say the immigrants they are seeing in immigration court are not criminals, but working people trying to follow the process and protect their families. The Rev. Terry LePage, a member of Irvine United Congregational Church in Orange County, said she has seen people whose cases have been dismissed get immediately picked up by immigration officials in courthouse hallways and taken away in vans.

"You see a family broken up, a life go down the drain in front of your eyes," she said. "I cry a lot these days. But I know I am where God needs me to be. I'm able to bear this pain, which is very small compared to theirs."



A sign and a shrine bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe are placed outside Santa Ana Immigration Court during a prayer vigil for immigrants in Santa Ana, Calif., July 31, 2025. (AP Photo/Deepa Bharath)

Laura Siriani, archdeacon with the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, led a midday prayer vigil outside the courthouse July 31. About 25 people participated.

"When we can pray together and learn about what's happening to our neighbors, it energizes us," she said. "We have to speak out and be the voice of those who have none."

Jennifer Coria, an immigration organizer with Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, a group that holds prayer vigils across Southern California, trains pastors and lay leaders in "what to do and what not to do" in court and how to relay information from detainees to loved ones, she said.

Coria said the volunteers don't ask people how they came into the country; their goal is simply to support individuals trying to navigate the system.

Fr. Scott Santarosa, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, helped start an interfaith program in the Diocese of San Diego called Faithful Accompaniment In Trust and Hope to support migrants seeking asylum. He said volunteers, including himself, feel "gutted" and helpless as they see people being arrested in the hallways and taken away.

In his 2,300-strong parish, where six of seven Masses are in Spanish, the priest estimates that up to 40% of worshippers may be in the country illegally. Santarosa takes inspiration from the story of Christ rescuing the Apostle Peter when his faith wavers, he said.

"We're being asked to do the impossible," he said. "No one likes to be powerless. But we are being asked by the Spirit to come and stand with people in this difficult moment and be powerless with them."

At Our Lady of Soledad Catholic Church in the Coachella Valley, about 7,000 gather for Mass every weekend. Fr. Francisco Gomez says about 20% of his parish members are in the U.S. without legal status; some have been for decades, and have children and grandchildren.

He worries about parishioners becoming isolated because of fear. They're within the Diocese of San Bernardino, where Bishop Albert Rojas gave parishioners a dispensation from attending Mass after immigration detentions on two properties.

Gomez wants to let the community know "the church is not going away."

"We're here. What happens to any one of us is going to happen to all of us."



Laura Siriani, archdeacon of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, speaks at a prayer vigil for immigrants outside Santa Ana Immigration Court in Santa Ana, Calif., July 31, 2025. (AP Photo/Deepa Bharath)

Helping with food and other essentials

Last month, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles launched its Family Assistance Program to deliver groceries, meals, medicine and other essentials.

Msgr. Timothy Dyer, pastor of the largely-Latino St. Patrick Catholic Church in South Los Angeles, helped start the program, which is helping about 150 families with essentials such as rent, food, diapers and toilet paper.

"The community is rallying around these people," he said. "This is what a church ought to be."

Pastor Ara Torosian, who ministers to Farsi speakers at Cornerstone Church of West Los Angeles, a multiethnic Protestant congregation, came to the U.S. in 2005 as a refugee after being arrested for smuggling Bibles into Iran. He said he came through Catholic Charities and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society programs, which have been gutted under the Trump administration, leaving no legal pathways for religious minorities fleeing persecution in Iran.

Torosian's congregants were among those detained in a wave of immigration arrests after the Iran-Israel war in June. The pastor said his congregants came as asylum-seekers under the Biden administration and had work permits.

While a couple he had baptized and married in his church were arrested at their home, another family — a couple and their young daughter — were arrested during an immigration court appearance. The couple remains in detention awaiting Farsi translators, but the family of three was released with ankle monitors, Torosian said.

"We were all in tears when they came back to the Sunday service," he said.

The pastor is raising money to help these families with rent while their cases proceed. He worries about keeping up the rent assistance, given his church's limited resources, and is asking members living in the U.S. without legal status not to come to church.

"This is heartbreaking in a country like America," he said. "We are praying that the situation will change."

Associated Press video journalist Krysta Fauria in Los Angeles contributed reporting.