News



The Episcopal Diocese of Texas Diocesan Center in Houston. (Courtesy of EDOT)

Jack Jenkins

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The Episcopal Diocese of Texas announced on Saturday (Nov. 1) that one of its priests, a Kenyan national, has been detained by immigration officials despite working in the state legally.

The Episcopal bishop of Texas said the priest, who was a "legally employed Kenyan clergy member who works for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice," was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials this week while returning home from his workplace.

The statement added that the priest, who was not named, has been transferred to an immigration detention center in Conroe, north of Houston, and had been able to speak to his family. In its statement, the diocese, which covers most of the eastern part of the state, called for assistance from "representatives in power" and said pastoral and legal teams from the diocese are "accompanying the priest's community and family as they continue to seek justice and understanding in this matter."

Asked about the priest's arrest, the bishop, the Rt. Rev. C. Andrew Doyle, said the detained priest is "OK" but that church officials are still seeking answers. "We do not know yet why he was targeted," Doyle told Religion News Service in an email. "He is working legally and his immigration status is documented with a work permit."

Doyle said that the diocese is also in contact with some elected officials in the region, although he did not name which.

Officials with the Department of Homeland Security did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

At least one other religious leader, Muslim hospital chaplain Ayman Soliman, had been detained earlier by ICE as part of President Donald Trump's ongoing mass deportation effort. Soliman was detained in July and held for weeks before being released in September. A South Korean college student whose mother is an Episcopal priest was also detained over the summer, prompting outcry from faith leaders before her eventual release.

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The administration's immigration policies have been widely criticized by religious leaders, including prominent Episcopal Church leaders. At a service at the Washington National Cathedral celebrating Inauguration Day, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, made headlines for her sermon, in which she asked Trump, who was in the pews, to "have mercy" on immigrants. The president later dismissed Budde as a "so-called Bishop."

A few weeks later, the Episcopal Church became a plaintiff in a faith-led lawsuit against the administration challenging the president's decision to rescind an internal government policy that discouraged ICE raids in "sensitive locations" such as churches. ICE and DHS agents have conducted enforcement activities near or even on church property at least 10 times this year.

In May, the Episcopal Church formally ended its longstanding partnership with the federal government to resettle refugees, citing the government's decision to halt the refugee program for virtually everyone except for white Afrikaners.

Religious leaders of various traditions have also protested the administration's immigration policies, with some being shot with pepper balls and pepper rounds and hundreds of others publicly pledging to put their "bodies on the line" to advocate for immigrants.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.