News



Federal law enforcement officers with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Enforcement and Removal Operations conduct a traffic stop and detain people, Nov. 17, 2025, in Washington. (AP/Alex Brandon)

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November 21, 2025
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On Tuesday (Nov. 18), the pastor of an 80-person Latino Pentecostal church got a concerning WhatsApp audio message. The message, allegedly created by an unidentified pastor, circulating among Atlanta-area evangelical faith leaders, claimed massive immigration raids would occur there on Thursday and Friday.

Soon, church members were sending him messages asking what they should do about the potential raids. By that evening at their teaching and prayer service, he had to address the rumor with his congregation.

"Stay calm," he told them in Spanish, but "take care of yourselves. Don't go out if you don't need to go out."

The pastor, who requested anonymity to protect his congregation, said he'd evaluate the situation on Thursday and make a decision about whether to cancel that day's service three hours before its scheduled start.

By Thursday afternoon, he decided to go on with his service, having seen a video from Luis Estrada, a Telemundo Atlanta anchor, saying the viral message was unreliable because of lack of evidence. The anchor noted the Trump administration's

pattern of targeting Democratic-led states, which if consistent, would exclude Georgia. But other pastors canceled their services, and Estrada said in the video he received over 100 messages asking about the mysterious audio.

Faith leaders in other parts of the country were also worried this week, after a local news site in Massachusetts published a story warning of potential U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on churches over the upcoming holidays went viral. The story was shared through social media channels and messaging apps before leaders could sort out whether the reports were true or not.

ICE and other Department of Homeland Security officials have yet to raid a church building. But immigration agents have arrested immigrants on or near church property in at least a dozen instances so far this year, after the Trump administration rescinded an internal government policy discouraging raids on sensitive places like houses of worship. And fear of further escalation remains at the forefront in the minds of many worshippers at immigrant-heavy and Spanish-speaking churches, where attendance is down in many congregations. Viral stories like the one from New England only magnify those concerns, faith leaders say. Published on a local news website called This Week in Worcester, the story cites unnamed Department of Justice sources in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York who claimed that DHS plans to raid Spanish-language churches and other houses of worship over the holidays.

The story also cited an unnamed Hispanic pastor who said government agents had already been to his church to ask about the names and addresses of church members, as well as several pastors who said they received advertisements for the CBP Home app, which DHS uses to encourage people to self-deport. It said evangelical leaders such as the Rev. Clint Pressley, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, were briefed on the plan.

DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin denied the report of church raids in a statement to RNS.

"Stop with the smears," the statement read. "ICE does not raid churches — regardless of if it is Holiday season or not. This is just another false narrative to try and demonize our brave ICE law enforcement who are facing a 1000% increase in assaults against them and a 8000% increase in death threats."

However, McLaughlin did not rule out a raid on a church, saying in the statement, "If a dangerous illegal alien felon were to flee into a church, or a child sex offender was working as an employee, there may be a situation where an arrest is made to protect public safety."

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Southern Baptist leaders said they have had no discussion with the DHS about any raids on churches.

"Neither the SBC President nor the Executive Committee has participated in briefings or been in any discussions with governmental officials about these immigration enforcement operations," Brandon Porter, the SBC Executive Committee's vice president for communications, told RNS in an email.

Pressley, who is pastor of Hickory Grove Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, told RNS he'd had no contact with DHS.

"It's completely fabricated. All false," Pressley told RNS in a text.

Pressley said that if he had been asked about raids on churches, he would have opposed them.

"Law and order should prevail and can prevail without raiding churches," he said.

Even so, the Rev. Dave Woessner, an Episcopal priest who lives in Worcester and works for the Massachusetts Council of Churches, said the article caught local church leaders by surprise. The website in question generally covers local news and is not known for investigative journalism. At first, the story caused alarm as it began to spread through social media.

Woessner said local church leaders are concerned but in a holding pattern, waiting to see if a larger news outlet might confirm the story.

"We didn't want to panic," he said, adding that church leaders are preparing for the worst, in case the story turns out to be true.

John Keough, a 43-year-old local reporter, media consultant and former staffer for the Baptist Churches of New England, stood by his reporting in an interview with

RNS, saying he wrote the story to warn churches. He said the issue is personal to him: A Hispanic congregation had taken him in when he got out of prison after being convicted on charges related to a home invasion in his 20s. It helped him reintegrate into society, and he said he still has close ties to local Spanish-speaking churches. He got to know some DOJ officials while reporting on an investigation into the Worcester Police Department.

Keough said one of those officials, a fellow Christian, told him about the possible raids, and that led him to look into the story. He'd already been concerned about ICE activity in Worcester, especially after a 16-year-old girl was arrested in May.

"That doesn't line up for me with America," he said.

Keough said he'd already seen that Spanish-speaking worshippers were staying away from churches out of fear of ICE, and he feared things could get worse. Then, he heard that ICE had conducted an immigration enforcement action on the grounds of a church in Charlotte last weekend, which pushed him to publish the story.

"I hope the administration will back off on the plan a little bit and maybe think twice," he said. "Maybe we shouldn't be doing this in America."

DOJ officials in Massachusetts and Rhode Island did not respond to a request for comment.

The Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, has been fielding calls and emails from pastors and other church leaders who read the story and are worried about possible raids. She and other staffers have been trying to sort out whether the stories about raids are true and helping churches prepare to protect parishioners.

"At a minimum, what we need to be doing is ensuring the safety of all of God's people," she said.

Everett said churches have been worried about potential raids ever since the Trump administration ended the restriction on raids at sensitive locations. The Massachusetts Council of Churches is one of a number of religious groups suing the Trump administration over the policy change. The latest rumors have only made things worse, she said.

In Atlanta, the Pentecostal pastor said most of his congregation has some type of legal documents, but even for them, "the fear comes because of the separation of their families, children, wives, husbands." With the whispers of massive raids, the "uncertainty of what will happen, will they come? Will they not come?" looms large, he said

Church members felt reassured early on in Trump's second term that immigration enforcement would target criminals, and the pastor encouraged members to pay any fines and get right with the law. But, by now, they've seen news reports of immigration enforcement outside churches and cases where immigration authorities don't appear to respect someone's documents.

The congregation has drastically rolled back its street evangelization ministry for fear of being out in public too long. Yet despite lingering anxiety, the pastor said he did not want to cancel Thursday worship if it was not necessary.

As of Thursday, increased immigration enforcement activity had not been reported in Atlanta, and the pastor said he hadn't seen anything notable.

"The Bible demands that we pray for people in positions of authority, and our only desire is to serve God freely without any fear," the pastor said.

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