News



Bishop Brendan Cahill, bishop of the Diocese of Victoria in Texas, preaches to migrants during an Advent service at the Del Camino Jesuit Border Ministries Casa del Migrante, Nov. 30, 2025, in Brownsville, Texas. (Courtesy of Fr. Brian Strassburger)

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Earlier this month, the Rev. Pilar Pérez, a United Methodist minister in the denomination's Western North Carolina Conference, called up a parishioner who hadn't been to worship in a while. The pastor encouraged the congregant to attend Christmas services, even offering to give her a ride.

"I was begging her: 'I'll go and pick you up,'" Pérez said.

The parishioner could not be convinced. She told Pérez that come Christmas, her family planned to mark the Christian holiday the safest way they know how: by watching the service on Facebook Live.

Pérez understood. Like many immigrant families, the family members have barely left their home in recent weeks out of fear of encountering federal immigration agents. It's a fear they believe is well founded, as immigration officers have detained and deported thousands across the country, including at least one person in North Carolina who was just outside a church."That's where they are," said Pérez, who has spent recent months delivering groceries and other necessities to such families.

Faith leaders are facing similar situations across the country this Christmas season, as clergy, churches and other religious organizations wrestle with how to mark one

of the most important Christian holidays while also serving an immigrant population in crisis.

The Rev. Melvin Valiente, who pastors two Los Angeles County Baptist churches with his wife, Ada, said he is preaching a specific message to his congregations this holiday season: "Jesus knows what it is to be an immigrant, knows what it is to be persecuted."

He also uses a system that sends out personalized texts with Bible verses, hoping Christmas messages of peace can connect with members who are too afraid to come to church.

Their church members will also be preparing bags of food for families outside their congregation who have a detained loved one or are too afraid to go out, both to fortify them with regular groceries and help them celebrate a special dinner for "Nochebuena," or Christmas Eve. One church member plans to host lonely immigrants at her own Nochebuena dinner.

Back in North Carolina, attendance at Pérez's majority-immigrant church has dropped as much as 40% since November, she said, when a surge of immigration agents deployed to her state for a week. In her congregation, 11 families essentially haven't left their homes since.

The pastor compared the situation to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when churches avoided meeting in person and moved worship services online.

"Isolation is hurtful — it's hurtful spiritually, emotionally and physically," Pérez said.



Jesuit Fr. Brian Strassburger. (Courtesy)

In response, Pérez's church has partnered with another nearby Methodist congregation to offer an additional layer of protection for churchgoers. Over the past few weeks, the pastor of a nearby partner congregation has come to the church and sat near the door during worship — and plans to do so during Christmas services as well. The idea, Pérez says, is for the partner pastor to be the first person immigration enforcement officers encounter should they ever approach the church.

Pérez and others have also delivered weekly food boxes to congregants who are still staying home, an effort bolstered by an influx of donations: A local Christmas giving ministry shifted its efforts to the nearby immigrant population, with 80% of donations heading to Hispanic families.

The Rev. Luke Edwards oversees a separate fund set up by the Western North Carolina Conference after the Charlotte raids for the needs of immigrant congregations, such as legal costs and rent.

But even with the influx of resources, Edwards said, communities are struggling. He noted that many of the Hispanic churches he works with traditionally celebrate Las Posadas, reenactments of the Christmas story, in December.

But this year, "They're either canceling those, scaling them back, rescheduling them or moving things onto Zoom," he said. The federal government's mass deportation effort, Edwards said, "is impacting our churches' ability to worship."

In Boston, Bishop Nicolas Homicil said his largely Haitian flagship church, Voice of the Gospel Tabernacle Church, still plans to have in-person worship on Christmas, but it's expecting lighter attendance than the up-to-300 it typically draws.

The Trump administration is slated to revoke Temporary Protected Status for Haitians on Feb. 3.

"We don't want to fool ourselves to say, 'Yes, we expect the church to be full,' because there are people who are still afraid to come out," Homicil said. "People are even afraid to come to (the) food pantry."

He added of other Boston churches: "Every church is suffering this crisis."

Other clergy are seeking to bring the holidays to immigrants who have already been separated from their communities. Fr. Brian Strassburger, a Jesuit priest who works along the U.S.-Mexico border as director of Del Camino Jesuit Border Ministries, said he plans to host a Posada event outside the airport in Harlingen, Texas.

"During that span of time, we anticipate that there will be one, two or even three flights coming in and out with detained migrants," Strassburger said. He hopes the sight of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter will offer a "public witness there in that space" and be "a sign of hope."

The priest said his group of three Jesuits is supporting migrants who are fighting "hopelessness and despair" during Christmas. They were unable to get permission to celebrate a Christmas Mass at Port Isabel Detention Center, but they were able to celebrate several Advent Masses there, as well as host more-typical Posadas with skits and piñatas for the children in two Reynosa, Mexico, migrant shelters.

They are also planning to celebrate 10 baptisms and two first Communions on Christmas Eve in a migrant shelter in Matamoros, Mexico. The immigrants living in those shelters are in many ways stuck, lacking the means to go elsewhere in Mexico or back home and no longer able to seek U.S. asylum after President Donald Trump suspended that program in January.

Strassburger described a recent experience of holding a 2-day-old baby in the shelter and being struck by the parallels in the Christmas story.

"Standing in a forgotten, underresourced migrant shelter along the U.S.-Mexico border on the wrong side of a political boundary is much like this stable in Bethlehem because there's no room at the inn and that's where Christ enters into the world," he said.

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With the arrival of Christmas — a gift-giving season — religious leaders have been trying to offer what support they can.

In Washington, D.C.'s Maryland suburbs, the English-speaking community at St. Camillus Catholic Church joined Latinos for their Las Posadas celebrations this month to show "we see us as one family" and make Latinos feel less afraid to participate, said Kathy, a coordinator of the parish's migrant response team who asked to be identified by her first name to avoid harassment.

Since the fall, their parish has averaged more than one new family a week experiencing a detention, she said.

"To be honest, I wish that we had time and energy for some special Christmas gift programs, but the truth is we are running as fast as we can and using all of the resources we have just to kind of keep up with the day-to-day emergency needs," Kathy said, including prayer, emergency counseling and food deliveries. They also

try to have a supportive presence outside immigration court.

Federico, a Catholic leader in Chicago who asked to use his middle name because he lacks legal immigration status, said his parish is facing the same deluge. He is pleading for more wealthy congregations to step in because of the sheer scale of the needs.

In North Carolina, a Charlotte-area initiative called Operación Esperanza has emerged as a partnership between Transforming Nations Ford, a community development nonprofit, and Iglesia Tabernaculo de Gracia, a Hispanic Pentecostal church

The project has been distributing food and other items to impacted immigrant families, but according to Rosa Ramirez, who helps lead the effort, volunteers recently began asking families what their children would want for Christmas. The effort has been difficult — partly, she said, because asking for something "is, culturally, not comfortable for a lot of our families."

But beyond that, "for a lot of our families, it's not even about trying to figure out the holidays," Ramirez said. "That's just the last thing on their mind right now."

Yet she said the holiday effort is an important part of their work — especially for families who may be celebrating Christmas alone or, in some cases, without family members who have been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"It's super important that they have choices — that our children get to consider what they would want on their Christmas list, even if that's not something that they've done before or that they thought they were going to be able to do this year," Ramirez said.

And besides, Ramirez said, the shared faith of those involved in the effort — which includes an array of local churches — points them toward an unambiguous conclusion.

"As Christians, we're called to love our neighbor and to treat the immigrant and the foreigner as our own," she said. "I think I've really seen that lived out in a way that is really beautiful to see, even though it's such a horrifying time."

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