News



People demonstrate against Immigration and Customs Enforcement actions outside the Bishop Henry Whipple Building, Jan. 12, 2026, in Minneapolis. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

Jack Jenkins

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A group of clergy seeking to offer pastoral care to immigrant detainees at a federal building was denied on Tuesday morning (Jan. 13), with officials at the government facility, a hub of Immigration and Customs Enforcement activities for the region, telling the group "not at this time."

The denial came after three United Church of Christ pastors — the Rev. Susie Hayward, who serves as minister for justice organizing at Creekside UCC, and the Revs. Rebecca Voelkel and T. Michael Rock, both of Lyndale UCC — approached the Bishop Henry Whipple Building after attending a vigil across the street. The building has become a fixture for anti-ICE demonstrations, and on Monday, Department of Homeland Security agents responded to protests at the facility with pepper spray, pepper balls, flash-bang grenades and arrests.

The pastors, who were accompanied by a Religion News Service reporter, walked toward the building, offering prayer to DHS agents as they passed. They all declined.

"Treat people well, please," Rock shouted after agents as they passed.

The group was allowed into the building — something recently denied to protesters and even lawmakers such as Rep. Ilhan Omar, who was rebuffed last week alongside other members of Congress when they sought to inspect the facility. The pastors told RNS they have previously accompanied immigrant families who were attending immigration court proceedings, which also take place at the Whipple Building.

Standing near the elevator doors inside, the pastors were approached by a representative for the ICE duty desk. They made a request to offer pastoral care to detainees who self-identify as Christian, then stood waiting for several minutes.

As they waited, Voelkel noted that the building is named after a religious leader — Bishop Henry Whipple, an Episcopal bishop who advocated for Indigenous Americans in the 19th century.

"There's been a push in the last 10 years around, 'What would Whipple do?'" she said. "Part of the resistance to ICE and the deportation machine has been in Bishop Whipple's name."

When the official eventually returned, he said they would not be allowed in because the facility is "not taking visitors at this time." He added that the pastors would have to "call to make arrangements" for such a visit and then directed them to a phone number. The official acknowledged the number is often unreliable, saying people report hearing it ring twice before the line abruptly cuts out. But the official urged them to keep trying.

DHS did not respond to a request for comment.

The question of offering pastoral care to immigrant detainees has become a theological and legal flashpoint since President Donald Trump launched his mass deportation effort last year. The issue garnered national attention in Chicago, where Catholic priests and bishops, mainline Christian clergy and leaders from other faiths were publicly rebuffed by DHS officials when they reportedly sought to enter a government facility in Broadview, Illinois, to offer pastoral care and Communion elements to detainees. A group of Catholic priests, nuns and advocates has since sued over the denial, arguing they were able to provide pastoral care to immigrants in the facility in the past, and at least eight faith leaders have been arrested during protests focused on the issue outside Broadview.

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The denial of access for pastoral care has also raised alarm among prominent faith leaders, including Catholic bishops on Trump's own religious liberty commission who have spoken out. So, too, has Pope Leo XIV, who specifically addressed the situation in Chicago while speaking to reporters in November.

"The spiritual rights of people who have been detained should also be considered," Leo said. "I would certainly invite the authorities to allow pastoral workers to attend to the needs of those people."

At the time, DHS officials argued that clergy were not allowed to offer religious services at the Broadview facility because the building is "a field office; it is not a detention facility" and that immigrants are only held there briefly. But critics and

lawyers pointed to data provided by ICE that detainees were regularly held at the facility for days at a time.

On Tuesday, Rock appeared to reference that dynamic when he pressed the ICE duty desk official for clarity as to whether the facility was operating as a processing facility or a detention facility. The official did not offer a firm answer but said that because the building typically functions as a space for immigration court, it includes detaining cells for people appearing in court and for processing to go elsewhere.

"That's kind of what we thought — just a holding place for court," Rock said.

After they were denied, the group huddled in the lobby and embraced each other. They then launched into a prayer, bowing their heads as dozens of DHS agents and officials walked by on either side of them. Some of the agents watched, while others quickly pulled up their masks.

"I would ask, God, that you come up alongside all of those who are being held here unjustly," Hayward prayed. "May you meet them in their fear. May you meet them in their grief. May you help them to understand that you, God, stand with them, the most vulnerable."

Hayward also prayed for the "transformation of the hearts" of ICE agents and officials.

"May your Holy Spirit displace and disrupt and transform within them so that they might be called back to your path of love, to repent," she said.

She was echoed by Voelkel, who prayed that God "pour yourself upon ICE agents, that they might have their hearts turned, that they might love God and love neighbor and not perpetrate harm and abuse."

As they left, the group took a moment to chat with other DHS officers before eventually making their way outside the newly erected barricades that now surround the facility. They expressed frustration with the result of their efforts, but not surprise.

"We're faith leaders trying to provide a human response to a human problem," Rock said. "The immigration system is completely broken. It was before, and it's even worse so now. And making the problem worse is not helping our people."

Asked about what's next, Hayward said she was undeterred.

"We'll be back," she told RNS.

The sentiment was similar outside the Whipple building an hour earlier, when dozens of religious locals and faith leaders gathered for a multi-faith vigil. The vigil — largely organized by the Minnesota Interfaith Coalition on Immigration — has convened outside the building once a month since 2018, and many held signs referencing religious figures such as Pope Francis. Tuesday's vigil was led by a Catholic group, but featured a song from an Indigenous leader who other faith leaders identified as Joseph. Several in the crowd noted the Whipple building is near one of the most sacred places for the Dakota people, and Joseph made a point to speak warmly of Whipple's advocacy for Indigenous people.

"I think he did the best for his time," he said of Whipple.

The vigil also appeared to take on new meaning following the recent killing of Renee Good by an ICE officer. Joseph noted that he has many spirit guides in his tradition, and has asked Good to become one of his own — and she accepted, he said.

"Hopefully she's gonna tell me what to do to end this," he said.

About midway through the vigil, one of the organizers led the group in a call-and-response prayer, instructing participants to respond "Lord, hear our prayer" as she prayed for Good, her children and her family. The organizer then prayed for immigrants as well, as the Whipple building loomed behind her.

"For all families who have been harmed, separated and destroyed by immigration war in the United States we sigh, we weep and we mourn," she said.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** and **Immigration Protests in Minneapolis** feature series.