News



Clergy and others demonstrate against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Jan. 28, 2026, in Portland, Maine. (RNS/Sam Woodward)

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For the past week or so, every morning at around 7:15, the Rev. Jane Field, a Presbyterian Church (USA) minister and executive director of the Maine Council of Churches, drives out to a business in the greater Portland area. Once there, she and several of her fellow clergy — usually around two dozen — line up along the street near the exit to the business.

The goal, she said, is to form a visual and spiritual "shield" between the employees leaving their shift — the majority of whom are immigrants — and Department of Homeland Security agents who have surged into the state. The rotating band of clergy has gotten used to staring down agents during what has become a twice-daily ritual, she said, with officials often driving by or sometimes lingering in the parking lot.

"ICE has been there almost every time," Field said.

It's part of the faith-led efforts in Maine to resist "Operation Catch of the Day," the latest in President Donald Trump's series of mass deportation campaigns launched in cities across the U.S. over the past year. Like religious leaders in cities such as Minneapolis, Chicago and elsewhere, local clergy were quick to muster resistance to the rapid influx of immigration enforcement agents, even as they wrangled with the unusual geography of Maine.

And while reports emerged on Thursday (Jan. 29) that DHS may be ending its targeted campaign there, faith leaders say their work continues.

The Rev. Tara Humphries, who oversees Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church in Portland, said faith-led pushback to DHS and Immigration and Customs Enforcement efforts began before the administration launched its targeted campaign last week. Religious leaders have been gathering every Wednesday for weeks, they said, to participate in a vigil at the Cumberland County Jail, where ICE detainees were being held. In addition to the recurring vigil, Humphries said faith

leaders had developed relationships with people being detained, exchanging letters back and forth and helping to raise money for legal fees.

But then Operation Catch of the Day was announced Jan. 21, which drew a swift rebuke from the local county sheriff. Within 24 hours, Humphries said, the detainees in the jail had vanished.

"The federal government and ICE responded by — in the middle of the night — removing all the ICE detainees and sending them out of state," Humphries said. They added that while faith leaders have been able to track down some of the detainees, the whereabouts of others remain unknown.

"It's worse than it's being reported, which is heartbreaking," Humphries said.

The pastor has joined various Signal groups dedicated to pushing back against the DHS surge. The raw number of volunteer reports of agent activity in the town, Humphries said, has been staggering. According to the Department of Homeland Security, at least 100 people were detained in the first three days of the surge, and faith leaders say detentions have continued unabated since.

"The scope is absolutely horrifying," Humphries said.

Humphries noted locals in Portland have sometimes struggled to muster the same kind of "rapid response" efforts that have cropped up in other cities where DHS agents are highly visible.

In urban environments such as Minneapolis, it has become commonplace to see volunteers tracking suspected DHS vehicles and quickly responding to sightings of agents by recording their activities on phones and blowing whistles to alert the surrounding community.

But in Maine, where cities are small and the divide between rural and urban is sometimes hard to discern, unique challenges have emerged.

"Because Maine is Maine and because our city is small and also spread out, it's not like a lot of people could necessarily get there in 30 seconds," Humphries said.

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Even so, volunteers have pressed on. Humphries said that in Lewiston, which is home to a large Somali American population targeted by DHS, it has been "tons of Somali women" who have begun serving as rapid responders.

Faith leaders have sought to push back in other ways as well. Over the weekend, hundreds of faith leaders, politicians, activists and others packed into the Agora Grand Event Center in Lewiston to voice outrage over ICE. Among the speakers was Amran Osman, head of Generational Noor, a local nonprofit that serves immigrant communities.

"You belong in your neighborhoods," Osman said. "You belong in the safe spaces that have been filled with joy, learning and care. You belong here. This is your country — it's your country as much as it is everyone else's."

Field also spoke, flanked by roughly 80 fellow faith leaders, as did the Rev. Jodi Hayashida, a Unitarian Universalist minister who also helped organize the event.

In her remarks, Field invoked the biblical story of the Good Shepherd, who leaves behind 99 sheep who are safe to protect one sheep who is at risk of being hunted by wolves.

"Well friends, the wolves have arrived here in Maine," Field said. "And they're wearing ICE agent clothing."

Field then gestured behind her, adding: "These good shepherds — these faith leaders of Maine — are here to show that they will go to the margins and stand with our immigrant neighbors, working with them to fight off the vicious wolves and chase them — chase ICE — out of our great state."

Field also told Religion News Service that a delegation of religious leaders from the state recently returned from a convening in Minneapolis, where more than 600 pastors from across the country were trained on how to resist DHS. The leaders, she said, are planning to "debrief" fellow clergy on what they learned.

In the meantime, religious communities have worked to put pressure on their elected officials. On Tuesday, a group of roughly 30 faith leaders — including Humphries — staged a protest outside of the office of Maine's Sen. Susan Collins. The clergy, who sang religious songs and read from Scripture during the demonstration, said they were calling on the moderate Republican to "use her power

to end funding to ICE and put an end to their campaign of terror." Ultimately, nine of the faith leaders were arrested during the demonstration.

Representatives for Collins' office did not respond to multiple requests for comment about the protest, but the senator announced on Thursday that White House officials told her that the surge of DHS agents has ended in the state.

"There are currently no ongoing or planned large-scale ICE operations here," Collins said in a statement. "I have been urging Secretary Noem and others in the Administration to get ICE to reconsider its approach to immigration enforcement in the state."

Reached via text message on Thursday, Humphries signaled caution about Collins' announcement, suggesting that because of Collins' past decisions and votes, "I have lost trust in her words."

However, Humphries argued that if DHS has halted or scaled back its operation, it "has everything to do with the incredible organizing, support, and applied pressure on officials of faithful, dedicated everyday Mainers."

Similarly, Field said that she welcomed the news in the short term but that she and other religious leaders "remain guarded and realistic about the possibility of more attacks on our immigrant neighbors resuming at any time." She signaled that a "reprieve" in Maine is unlikely to dampen growing religious outcry to ongoing mass deportation efforts across the country.

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