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People pray with grieving family members of Pierre Damas Bel, 20, who died earlier in the day on Aug. 31, 2026, in Springfield, Ohio. (RNS/Carol Guzy)

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Springfield, Ohio — September 2, 2026

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Only days after two Haitian pastors were detained by federal immigration agents in Springfield, Ohio, the wife of one of the pastors, Denise Adrien Gedeon, arrived at a Friday (Aug. 28) evening vigil in support of Haitians in the embattled city.

Asked to speak, she took the microphone at Champion City Church. Her voice trembling, eyes closed and hand raised, she began to sing: "We give you all the glory. We worship you our Lord, you are worthy to be praised."

Then she spoke in Haitian Creole about her faith and God, with Viles Dorsainvil, a Haitian community leader and pastor, interpreting. "Despite everything, despite the difficult time, we believe in him, and we believe he will see us through," she said, adding she did not want money or food — just the return of her husband, Joubert Adrien, whom she met singing in a church choir in Haiti in 1999. He was detained Aug. 20.

Gedeon's plea was part of an especially turbulent week in Springfield, Ohio. After the arrests of two Haitian pastors, Adrien and Julio Dumano, local Haitian leaders put out a call for support. More than 400 people responded — many of them faith leaders, some traveling from as far as Minnesota and Florida — to stand with Springfield. Three days after Gedeon's plea, Pierre Damas Bel, a 20-year-old Haitian college student, died in what his family is describing as a suicide.

Since the U.S. government removed temporary protected status for Haitians a few weeks ago, the Ohio city has been besieged by daily ICE raids, with over 30 Haitians detained by ICE, according to the Haitian Support Center, a nonprofit that assists Haitian nationals in Springfield. The organization estimates that ICE has outfitted more than 100 people with ankle monitors to track their whereabouts.

With about 10,000 Haitians living in the city of 58,000, many have been hiding out in their homes, fearing detainment. A small contingent of local Haitian community leaders, several pastors themselves, braved Friday's vigil. Many Haitian churches sat

empty Sunday morning.

During the weekend, hundreds of volunteers — Baptists, Unitarian Universalists, Mennonites, Quakers and others — packed food boxes for Haitians in hiding, held phone drives asking elected officials to release the pastors and stood outside Haitian churches on Sunday morning to advocate for Haitians' right to worship without fear.

That fear has been fueled by the flurry of rapid ICE raids happening throughout the city. Around 9 a.m. on Aug. 20, Gedeon said that she and her husband, Adrien, were riding in a car with Adrien's cousin and his wife. They had just pulled out of a gas station when a car sped in front of them and slammed on the brakes. Four other cars surrounded their vehicle.

"At that time, I kept saying, 'Please God, let us go, free us, please God, let us go,'" Gedeon recalled, speaking through an interpreter. Several masked officers she identified as ICE agents approached the vehicle and asked to see IDs and work permits, she said. The officers handcuffed the two men. Gedeon, who cried out to her husband before he was taken away, said she hasn't seen him since.

A father of two living in the U.S. for five years, Adrien is the Haitian ministry pastor at High Street Church, a Nazarene congregation in Springfield. Local advocates say he has no criminal history and no final order of removal. The couple had temporary protected status and have pending asylum cases, according to Gedeon.

Speaking to RNS on the back steps of High Street Church, head Pastor Marty Dennis explained that Adrien was part of a group of Haitians who visited his church four years ago seeking a place to worship in Haitian Creole. What began as 15 Haitians worshipping in a living room grew to over 100 people meeting in the church gymnasium, while Dennis' congregation held worship in their sanctuary.

Now the gym is empty. The Haitian congregants are worshipping remotely while Adrien is held in Butler County Jail, about an hour from Springfield. Even in prison, Dennis and Gedeon said, Adrien is ministering to those around him. "He loves God more than life itself," said Dennis. "I couldn't imagine doing life without him."

Gedeon, with the loss of her work permit, now stays at home, caring for their two kids, ages 7 and 14, alone. Last week, their youngest celebrated her seventh birthday without her father. But she said she leans on her faith in God, saying, "Maybe this happened for good reason, and the good reason was for him to go in that detention center, preach to people, be close to people, and give them hope."

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Michaelle Louis, a Haitian community organizer with Undivided — one of the several faith groups behind the week's gathering of faith leaders — said ICE is deliberately detaining men — "the head of the family." The idea is, she said, "if they deport the husband, the rest of the family is going to follow."

Carl Ruby, pastor of Central Christian Church and founder of G92, a nonprofit organization that advocates for immigrants, said he learned in meetings with regional and national ICE leaders that their aim is to make living in the U.S. unbearable for Haitians.

"I was surprised how candid they were," said Ruby. "They said ... 'We're going to make life as miserable as possible.'"

Though Springfield doesn't have the largest Haitian population in the U.S., pro-immigrant organizers say their city has been a political target since then-candidate Donald Trump and his running mate, J.D. Vance, spread falsehoods about the city's Haitians eating pets in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election. Nearly two years later, Haitians in Springfield said the ankle monitors, which many compared to slave shackles, are part of a Springfield-specific ICE experiment.

On Monday, 20-year-old Pierre Damas Bel, a pre-med student and soccer player at Wright State University, was fatally struck by a tractor-trailer. Bel's family is describing his death as a suicide. Ohio State Highway Patrol called it "an open investigation."

In a statement written by Bel's father after his son's death, he said his son had taken two trips to Cincinnati to plead with officers to remove his ankle monitor, which was visible when he played soccer. "After my son was outfitted with this ankle monitor, he felt like he was treated like an animal," he wrote. The statement says Bel's classmates bullied him because of the monitor.

A spokesperson for Wright State University said the university was "heartbroken" about the death of Bel. The university has "no confirmed information regarding complaints or investigations into bullying related to the student," the spokesperson said in a statement, adding that "we remain dedicated to providing a campus community where every student feels safe, supported, included and welcomed."

Ruby, who was with Bel's parents Monday night, said he has seen "the extremes" in recent weeks.

"I believe in a good God who will eventually make all things right, who will punish evil and restore justice, but living in the here and now is really hard," he said. One day he gathered with hundreds to protest ICE's immigration policy. The next day, he said, he listened to "the sobs and screams" of Bel's parents.

"We need a revival of the spirit of the prophets where people of faith demand justice in their government and in their churches," he said.

On Sunday morning, dozens of clergy stood outside First Haitian Evangelical Church of Springfield, one of the city's largest Haitian congregations and home to Pastor Julio Dumano, an assistant pastor at the church who was detained on Aug. 25. The whereabouts of Dumano, who was described by fellow clergy as a "godly man," are currently unknown.

Standing alongside the road, visiting faith leaders waved American flags and held signs that said, "Release Pastors Julio and Joubert" and "Jesus loves Haitians."

Inside, nearly 40 volunteers and faith leaders sat in chairs alongside Haitian congregants, singing "How Great Thou Art" in Haitian Creole and in English. Though the once-packed church had only a few-dozen Haitian members that Sunday, their enthusiasm wasn't diminished. The congregants, wearing suits, dresses and heels in bright colors, danced in worship and welcomed their visitors with enthusiasm.

"Thank you so much for coming," Pastor Reginald Silencieux said warmly from the podium. "When I see your presence, it's very encouraging. When Haitian people see you, they can see Jesus is alive. Amen?"

Hours later, over 400 people made their way to City Hall, where they shared an outdoor potluck, sang "We Shall Overcome" and heard remarks from local leaders. Speakers made three demands of ICE, the Department of Homeland Security and elected officials: release the pastors, stop outfitting Haitians with ankle monitors and stop "treating them inhumanely because of their nationality and the color of their skin."

"We're making these demands in the name of Christ," Ruby said at the rally.

At the conclusion of Sunday's event, Haitian pastor Bernadette Dor-Dominique invited attendees to march seven times around City Hall. She explained that the "Jericho march" was a reference to the biblical book of Joshua, which says God tore down the walls of Jericho after the Israelites marched around the city for seven days.

"It is a symbolic act of faith, unity, perseverance and trust in God when the situation appears impossible," said Dor-Dominique. "We are walking against fear and division, standing together as one community."

Since Springfield's Haitian population became national news during the 2024 campaign, the city has endured [bomb threats](#), [neo-Nazi rallies](#) and now an ICE surge. But pro-immigrant advocates, like Louis, say the city's story remains one of resilience and faith.

"We are not powerless," said Louis, one of the Haitian leaders who invited clergy to Springfield this weekend.

Ruby, for his part, said he was "encouraged" by the number of volunteers who showed up Sunday, but "until the entire church practices a faith that looks like Jesus, we have a lot of work to do."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. [View the full series](#).