



Faith leaders kneel to block an entrance to a building that houses the National Criminal Analysis and Targeting Center, Friday, Sept. 4, 2026, in Williston, Vermont. (RNS/Courtesy photo)

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Seven faith leaders were arrested in Williston, Vermont, on Sept. 4, charged with blockading the entrances to a building where workers help immigration agents target their efforts, with the clergy insisting their faith compels them to oppose President Donald Trump's ongoing mass deportation campaign.

The arrests occurred as faith leaders sought to decry the actions of the National Criminal Analysis and Targeting Center, one of three major facilities that help Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents hone their operations.

According to the Rev. Rebecca Girrell, a United Methodist pastor who took part in the protest and was among those arrested, faith leaders began blocking the building's entrances about 7:30 a.m. They remained there for roughly three hours, with the clergy singing, praying and reading the names of people Girrell said have "been killed in ICE interactions or died in detention."

Ultimately, Girrell was arrested by Vermont state police alongside six others: two United Church of Christ ministers, an Episcopal priest and the archdeacon of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, a Quaker leader and a Unitarian Universalist minister.

"I think it is imperative on me, as a faith leader, to proclaim that human beings are not targets and that God is a God of justice and of love," said Girrell, who serves United Community Church in Morrisville, Vermont, a congregation affiliated with both the UMC and the United Church of Christ.

"We are called to love our neighbors, to love the strangers and the foreigners that live among us, to recognize that we are all sojourners," she said.

According to footage recorded at the scene, at least two of the clergy were physically carried out of the center by law enforcement as they were arrested, including the Rev. Karen Johnston, senior minister at First Unitarian Universalist

Society of Burlington. In a statement to Religion News Service, Johnston said she "refused to cooperate" with law enforcement, explaining that her UU values of "justice, equity, generosity, interdependence and transformation call (her) and all people of conscience and faith to actively not cooperate with the system of cruelty that is fueled by this center."

Later Sept. 4, Vermont State Police published mug shots of the faith leaders alongside a press release stating those arrested were charged with "unlawful trespass."

Representatives for the Department of Homeland Security did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the protest.

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The targeting center has been the site of multiple protests in recent months, organized by what Girrell described as a "loose consortium of concerned neighbors." Advocates have focused their efforts on the targeting center, she said, because of the significant role it plays in directing ICE's actions elsewhere in the country.

The pastor added that while this is her first time being arrested at the building — which is private property, not a federal facility, and includes offices of other groups that are not tied to ICE — she had attended three similar protests there. But past protests were not led by faith leaders, Girrell said, and she believes it's important to showcase religious resistance to an administration that has often invoked faith while pursuing its policy goals.

"Christianity, especially, gets painted into a very pro-government, pro-deportation, Christian nationalist flavor," she said. "It's so important to realize that's a loud voice, but I don't even think it's the most prevalent voice."

The arrests add to a growing list of clergy who have encountered law enforcement while protesting against the Trump administration's immigration policies. Last fall, at least seven faith leaders were arrested while protesting outside an ICE facility in [Broadview, Illinois](#), where clergy said they had previously been shot with pepper balls fired by federal agents while protesting in the area. In January, about 100 clergy were also arrested while staging a protest outside the [Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport](#), with faith leaders occupying the busy street in front of the

facility to speak out against ICE activity there that had resulted in the detention of some workers.

Dozens of individual faith leaders, religious groups and entire denominations have also filed at least 22 [lawsuits challenging Trump's immigration policies](#) since he was inaugurated, and hundreds of other faith leaders across the country have been trained to observe and resist the ICE efforts.

Girrell said she met some of the clergy arrested Sept. 4 at one such training that took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in January. The Methodist pastor, who spoke to RNS at the time, was one of more than 600 clergy who flew to the city to help push back against the thousands of immigration agents who had descended on the region.

The Sept. 4 protest in Williston, she said, is part of her effort to draw on what she learned at that gathering and push back against ICE in her own state.

"We really wanted to make a statement, as people of faith and conscience, about how we need to be responding and showing up in the face of this injustice and dehumanization in Vermont," Girrell said.

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