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A migrant family is dropped off Dec. 13, 2022, at a local migrant shelter run by the Annunciation House in downtown El Paso, Texas. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed an appeal July 15 of a state judge's July 2 ruling to deny his effort to shut down Annunciation House. (OSV News/Reuters/Ivan Pierre Aguirre)

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Over the past few months, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has been locked in a court battle with Annunciation House, a network of shelters in the El Paso area that assists migrants with basic needs and legal aid. On July 2, 2024, district court [Judge Francisco Dominguez issued a ruling](#) denying Paxton's attempt to shut down Annunciation House. Paxton [appealed](#) two weeks later.

In his original suit, [Paxton sought to](#) rescind Annunciation House's [ability to operate as a nonprofit](#) in Texas, alleging that its efforts to assist migrants amount to "[human smuggling](#)."

[Dominguez stated](#) in his ruling that Paxton's demands for documents from Annunciation House were simply a pretext to achieve a predetermined outcome of closing the shelter and that, rather than gathering evidence first, Paxton had assumed a crime and then sought evidence for it.

The judge stated further that Paxton's appeals to immigration law were unenforceable since immigration is a matter for federal law, and that the state had violated the [Texas Religious Freedom Restoration Act](#) by unfairly burdening Annunciation House in its religiously inspired humanitarian activities. Paxton has now appealed [to the Texas Supreme Court](#) to take up the case.

This case has drawn media attention to conflicts between religious communities that assist migrants and the goals of political authorities. Religious leaders [came to the defense](#) of Annunciation House, citing religious principles and a tradition of hospitality. Even Pope Francis [weighed in on the controversy in an episode](#) of "[60 Minutes](#)," condemning the lawsuit. "That is madness, sheer madness to close the border and leave them there," the pope said. "The migrant has to be received."

As a [scholar who studies these types](#) of [conflicts](#), I believe this situation highlights the enduring and evolving engagement of faith-based groups in supporting vulnerable populations, despite legal and political challenges.

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Teachings on migration and hospitality

Religious leaders and communities often look to texts and traditions to guide their actions toward migrants. For instance, the late Jonathan Sacks, the United Kingdom's former chief rabbi, noted that the command to "welcome the stranger" is found [at least](#) 36 times in the Torah, more than any other directive.

Many [Hindu families](#) practice unconditional hospitality, [honoring guests](#) in their rituals. The late scholar Alfred Hiltebeitel [noted](#) that the "Laws of Manu," a foundational text for dharma or ethical action in the Hindu tradition, commands hospitality as a fundamental aspect of proper action. According to Hiltebeitel, the epics "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" show how in worshippers' devotion to God, God is both host and guest. Thus, hospitality is a central feature of worship for most Hindus.

Christian scripture emphasizes kindness to strangers. [Both Jesus](#) and the apostle Paul [encouraged](#) early Christians to welcome outsiders. [Paul wrote](#) that some people who show hospitality have "entertained angels without knowing it."

Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and other faith traditions also uphold hospitality and remember the migratory journeys of their founders. These teachings have [historically inspired religious communities](#) to help immigrants.

Aiding fellow migrants

Acting on these faith principles, new migrants have historically established religious communities to serve as support networks for newcomers from their home countries, preserving their languages and cultures.

This has happened across the country, from [Italian Catholic migrants](#) in New York to [Buddhist migrants](#) in San Francisco, Chicago and elsewhere.

As one example, in my own state of Nebraska, [German, Swedish, Czech and Danish immigrants](#) created ethnic and religious communities in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Churches and [church-affiliated organizations offered](#) a way to preserve community and culture. Swedish Lutheran immigrants, for example, established Luther Academy in Wahoo, Nebraska, in 1883, and the language used in its catalog shifted from Swedish to English and back again for at least the first decade, reflecting their shifting linguistic and cultural identity.



Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton speaks ahead of a rally held by former U.S. President Donald Trump, in Robstown, Texas, Oct. 22, 2022. (OSV News/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

Charitable organizations for migrants

Religious communities in the U.S. have often drawn on principles of neighborly care by founding institutions to support vulnerable populations, including migrants.

For example, Catholic Charities, founded in 1910, [began providing](#) assistance to displaced people after World War II. It now aids refugees and immigrants with [social and legal services](#). Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, now called Global Refugee, started its refugee relief program in 1939. In the 1940s, [its mission expanded](#) from helping Lutheran refugees to anyone fleeing war or persecution. The refugee resettlement organizations [HIAS](#), rooted in the Jewish tradition, and [World Relief](#), rooted in evangelical Christianity, have their own histories of reaching out to displaced people from many religious backgrounds.

These long-standing commitments to helping immigrants and refugees explain why religious groups often challenge laws that penalize such aid. In 2018, volunteers with the Tucson, Arizona-based nonprofit No More Deaths [successfully appealed](#) convictions for littering and driving in protected areas, arguing that their religious values compelled them to leave water and supplies in the Arizona desert for migrants.

Similarly, a Florida law passed in May 2023 that cracks down on both undocumented immigrants and employers [was modified](#) after religious leaders voiced concerns that its bans on transporting undocumented immigrants would penalize people for driving migrants to church-related activities. One pastor [argued](#) that the law would put churches in an "untenable" position by forcing them to choose between following the law and obeying biblical mandates of compassion.

In the Annunciation House case, the Catholic bishop of El Paso and other religious leaders have [defended the shelter's humanitarian mission](#). They emphasized that Annunciation House neither enforces nor breaks immigration laws but focuses on providing aid and legal advice.

In citing religious principles that motivate them to provide this aid, staff and supporters of Annunciation House are the latest in a long line of religious people who have said the same.