News

Bishop Joseph Tyson, left, and Fr. Jesús Mariscal, right, of the Yakima Diocese worry about how their parishioners will cope with broad changes to immigration policy, which have had a chilling effect on many religious communities. (Northwest News Network/Anna King)

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The Rev. Jim Rigby has one question on his mind these days: What's the plan if immigration officers knock on his church's doors?

"That's what I'm feverishly trying to figure out — I'm trying to talk to lawyers," said Rigby, a pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas.

Since 2016, St. Andrew's has sheltered Hilda Ramirez and her son Iván, who say they fled Guatemala to escape domestic violence. They reached the U.S. in 2014, when Hilda applied for asylum, but was denied.

Ramirez has talked to NPR in the past, but doesn't feel safe giving interviews since President Donald Trump, who campaigned on promises of mass deportation, took office in January.

Until recently, churches were considered "sensitive locations" and immigration officers were restricted from taking action there. But on his first full day in office, President Trump rescinded these restrictions, making churches and other houses of worship susceptible to immigration enforcement.

Faith groups have sued the federal government over the change in two separate lawsuits, saying that it infringes on their religious freedom.

In February, a federal judge in Maryland temporarily blocked the Trump administration from sending immigration agents into the Quaker, Baptist and Sikh

congregations that sued. But the ruling only applies to their congregations.

Other faith leaders, like Rigby, say the uncertainty has had a chilling effect on their ministries.

"To me, the bottom line is more gospel than it is legal," said Rigby. "If there is religious liberty, we should have religious liberty to obey scripture and its commandment to treat the immigrant as well as we treat citizens."

Others at St. Andrew's are discussing plans about how to deal with a potential immigration raid — and what it means for Ramirez and her son.

"We know that Hilda and Ivan have a target on their back because they have been very outspoken about their situation. We've done everything we can to make sure that even though they have that target, they're safe here," said the Rev. Babs Miller, a pastor at St. Andrew's.

Expanding the concept of sanctuary

"Jesus himself — before he was born, his parents sought sanctuary," said Linda Rabben, a professor of anthropology at the University of Maryland who writes about the Sanctuary Movement.

During the 1980s when the Sanctuary Movement started, it was reported that there were more than 400 congregations involved, according to Rabben.

The term "sanctuary" has often meant that the person or family being housed is under immediate threat of deportation.

"So if they (houses of worship) give shelter to somebody, they are not protected by the law to do that," said Rabben.

Under the Trump administration, churches are now thinking more expansively about the concept of sanctuary to include migrants who fear that new policies could suddenly make them vulnerable to arrest or deportation.

The Rev. Ashley McFaul-Erwin said her Lake View Presbyterian Church in Chicago has stepped up their efforts to aid migrants since Trump's election.

"We have held multiple trainings for church members — because on Sunday mornings we are a public building and our doors are open. We just feel like it's best to be prepared."

These trainings include information about what to do if immigration agents enter the church, and which areas of the church are considered public and private.

Lake View Presbyterian has housed two different families since October 2023, after converting a Sunday school classroom into a studio apartment.

When asked about the family currently living there, McFaul-Erwin said she wanted to keep their details private, because she is reluctant to risk their safety.

When the church is open for worship is when they're most vulnerable, the pastor said.

"We now have signs up saying that ICE are not able to enter this space without a signed judicial warrant," she said.

Asked about the lifting of restrictions on immigration officers entering houses of worship, Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said that: "Our officers use discretion. Officers would need secondary supervisor approval before any action can be taken in locations such as a church or a school. We expect these to be extremely rare."

Sending mixed messages to migrants

In central Washington state, Catholic Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima said that he's worried about how these policies will affect his congregants and their ability to worship. According to him, more than 30% of his parishioners are likely in the U.S. without legal status.

"I'm heartened that we haven't had a noticeable drop in numbers at our Sunday masses in Spanish," said Tyson. "Folks are coming."

Tyson said people should be able to flee violence and poverty, and the United States has sent mixed messages to potential migrants.

"We're saying, 'Yeah we need your work. But no, don't come. But, yes come. But don't come.' The goal posts have moved around — a lot," the bishop said.

The Yakima Diocese isn't publicly offering sanctuary in their churches, but Catholics from within the diocese are offering legal recommendations, and places to hide for vulnerable migrants.

Fr. Jesús Mariscal, parochial vicar of St. Paul Cathedral in the Yakima diocese, said that after one service, several of his Anglo parishioners messaged him privately offering to help migrants. One texted, "If ever you know or hear of someone who needs a place to literally hide from ICE, send them to my house. The key is under the front mat."

Before he became a citizen, Mariscal said, he crossed the border without documentation, at age 12. He said he's touched to know that there are people in his community who are willing to take risks to offer sanctuary for others.

"I feel like my chest is filled with something, and my mind, and I feel like my brain also, and the blood rushes to my head," said Mariscal. "And I get goosebumps, and I get watery eyes. That's the feeling I get when I get the offers from these people."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.