

Chicago pastors help the city grapple with flood of migrants

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Chicago already was facing a homelessness crisis before Texas Gov. Greg Abbott began directing thousands of migrants entering his state to places that had declared themselves migrant-friendly sanctuary cities.

Since the transfers began in April 2022, more than 20,000 migrants—many of them destitute Venezuelans—have arrived. Many Chicagoans have expressed concerns the city's resources are being drained and have accused government officials of failing to communicate about the migrants' cost and their fates.

At the same time, advocates for the migrants, especially community organizers in more vulnerable neighborhoods, have pushed back against attempts to pit two marginalized groups against each other. These groups have stepped up to support the new arrivals and, in many cases, have found allies in local faith leaders.



Pastor David Black speaks with banquet attendees at First Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

(Photo by Max Li)

When Pastor David Black of First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, in the city's South Side, learned migrants would be housed at a shelter just two blocks from his church, he knew his congregation would need to help the neighborhood respond.

"There's already plenty of need present in this community," Black told Religion News Service. The challenge, he said, was "to support those who are coming into the community and also find ways that the situation can be a support to people who are historically living in the community."

As Black considered what this support should look like, he was having conversations with local leaders such as Paula Gean, founder of Chicago4All, which works to connect long-term residents with new arrivals like the recent migrants.

Gean, who immigrated to the United States from Colombia when she was 3, said she owes her family's success as immigrants to the support of neighbors in their new home. In her work today, she often looks to churches to play that role and frequently collaborates with faith leaders like Black.

"It's been really a joy to be able to follow her leadership and vision, and she's been very, very engaged," Black said. "She rightly recognizes that in the South Side of Chicago, churches are a really important center of community and civic life."

Through the partnership with Gean, Black mobilized First Presbyterian to host banquets and community conversations at the church so migrants and neighborhood residents could come together to build fellowship.

A banquet on Nov. 30, attended by more than 150 people, included translators to facilitate communication, and Stephany Rose Spaulding, a

diversity and inclusion consultant, led conversations on neighborliness.

Challenge for the church

Pastor Edward Morris Sr. of Parkway Gardens Christian Church, in the nearby predominantly Black Woodlawn neighborhood, saw the arrival of the migrants as a natural challenge for his church, planted in the 1950s to serve residents of a nearby apartment complex. The congregation decided then to join the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) because the denomination has a history of mission.

“It’s always been a community-driven church,” Morris said. “On the very front of the church building, it says, ‘For all people.’”

Morris became involved in the issue of migrants in the city about a year ago, after a fellow community leader invited him to speak to local residents worried about migrants moving into a makeshift shelter in a former school. Morris talked about the importance of Woodlawn being a welcoming community.

Soon after, he met Gean and began organizing efforts at the Parkway Gardens church to provide hygiene packets and deliver food and clothes to the shelter where migrants were staying.

Morris understands the concerns of his congregants and their neighbors and supports their desire for more communication.

He wants to see city officials hold community forums where they could listen to residents and explain what the government is doing about the influx of outsiders. He also believes the government should work more closely with both the migrants and the neighborhood to find solutions that work for everyone.

“I think there still needs to be more open lines of communication, and that

would deter a lot of the negative pushback that they're getting," he said. "It may not deter it completely, but at least people would feel they're not being put upon."

Plea for understanding

At the same time, Morris would like to see more understanding from community members.

"I would like to see communities, especially African American communities, understand the situation of the migrants is not that far from our own situation," he said. "Years ago, when folks were coming up out of the South and then moving into Chicago, they were rejected by the white community."

He cites the Bible's Book of Deuteronomy, saying: "Remember the stranger when he is in your midst. Treat them with love and treat them with kindness, remembering that you, yourself, were a stranger in the land at one time."

When he spoke with RNS, Morris had just finished preparing for the church's food and clothing drive, which has been open for more than a decade and serves 60 to 75 people weekly—with an increasing number of migrants. As a result, the church has been training its volunteers to use a translation app on their cellphones to understand the newcomers.

Black said the majority of community residents want to find a way to both support the migrants and build support for a part of Chicago that has been historically underserved and under-resourced.

At the banquet at First Presbyterian, a speaker from Southside Together Organizing for Power, a community organizing group, talked about what it means to have Black and brown unity.

“It’s basically founded on this idea that there’s no scarcity,” Black said, asserting there is “enough for everybody—for the asylum-seekers, and the historically disenfranchised populations of South Side Chicago.”

“We have so much more to gain from our unity than from the division which is being manufactured and orchestrated by interests that don’t want these communities to get the resources they need,” Black said.