

Religious organizations sue over ICE raids at churches

July 30, 2025

(RNS)—A group of Christian denominations and organizations—including American Baptist Churches USA and the Alliance of Baptists—filed a lawsuit on July 28 against Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem over immigration enforcement in houses of worship.

The litigation sparked by the Trump administration’s decision to rescind a policy discouraging immigration raids at houses of worship is the fourth such lawsuit brought on the question of arrests made at “sensitive locations.”



Masked federal agents wait outside an immigration courtroom on Tuesday, July 8, 2025, in New York. (AP Photo/Olga Fedorova)

In the past, immigration enforcement actions at churches were discouraged by a 2011 internal government memo that advised against raids at sensitive locations, such as houses of worship, schools and hospitals.

But Trump did away with the policy shortly after taking office, which faith

groups argue in their suit “is not just harmful and un-American,” but also “violates federal law.” The groups cite both freedom of assembly guaranteed under the First Amendment, as well as rights outlined by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Administrative Procedure Act.

“For Plaintiffs and their members, the present threat of surveillance, interrogation, or arrest at their houses of worship means, among other things, fewer congregants participating in communal worship; a diminished ability to provide or participate in religious ministries; and interference with their ability to fulfill their religious mandates, including their obligations to welcome all comers to worship and not to put any person in harm’s way,” the complaint reads.

In addition to the American Baptists and Alliance of Baptists, the plaintiffs include five regional synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; three regional Quaker groups; and Community Churches.

They are represented by Democracy Forward, Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and the Washington law firm Gilbert LLP.

‘Our call is to love our neighbor’

“As people of faith, we cannot abide losing the basic right to provide care and compassion,” Bishop Brenda Bos of the ELCA’s Southwest California Synod said in a statement.

“Not only are our spaces no longer guaranteed safety, but our worship services, educational events and social services have all been harmed by the rescission of sensitive space protection. Our call is love our neighbor, and we have been denied the ability to live out that call.”

Asked about the lawsuit, Assistant Homeland Security Secretary Tricia

McLaughlin told Religion News Service, “We are protecting our schools, places of worship by preventing criminal aliens and gang members from exploiting these locations and taking safe haven there because these criminals knew law enforcement couldn’t go inside under the Biden Administration.”

The Department of Homeland Security did not immediately respond to a follow-up question asking to specify an example of a gang member taking refuge in a church under the previous administration, but the initial statement insisted raids on sensitive locations require special protocols before being carried out.

“Officers would need secondary supervisor approval before any action can be taken in locations such as a church or a school,” McLaughlin said, adding, “We expect these to be extremely rare.”

‘Painting everybody with a criminal brush’

In an interview with RNS, Bos rejected McLaughlin’s characterization of those targeted by recent immigration enforcement actions, which the government’s own data has indicated are often—and in some cases, mostly—people without criminal convictions.

“What we’re looking at is folks that have been deeply embedded in the communities and in their congregations, real people of faith and service who are being harmed,” Bos said. “I don’t have a lot of patience for this administration painting everybody with a criminal brush.”

Even acknowledging enforcement actions at churches is a shift for the Trump administration, which has repeatedly insisted immigration raids haven’t taken place at any houses of worship.

McLaughlin told the *Washington Post* earlier this month, “Immigration enforcement operations haven’t been conducted at churches or places of worship.”

In addition, conservative outlet Daily Wire quoted Trump border czar Tom Homan on July 9 saying he did “not know of a single incident of a church arrest.”

Arrests near churches have chilling effect

A month earlier, according to the complaint, federal agents detained a man in the parking lot of a Disciples of Christ church in Downey, Calif., a scene filmed as the agents were confronted by a pastor. Asked about the incident by RNS, Department of Homeland Security officials responded with a statement that instead referred to a separate incident near a different church.



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Baltimore Field Officer director Matt Elliston listens during a briefing, Monday, Jan. 27, 2025, in Silver Spring, Md. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

The complaint also describes officers detaining parishioners at two churches in the Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino, including a man who was doing landscaping for one of the churches.

San Bernardino Bishop Alberto Rojas formally lifted the obligation to attend Mass for Catholics who are concerned about ICE raids, following a similar statement by the Diocese of Nashville issued in May that concluded, “no Catholic is obligated to attend Mass on Sunday if doing so puts their safety at risk.”

Monday’s filing also detailed incidents that occurred near churches, including at least one incident on a sidewalk outside a Catholic church in Downey the same day the video was made at the Disciples of Christ church.

Arrests near a church, the suit said, can have a chilling effect on attendance. The Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese has disputed that the person apprehended was connected to the church or the parish school, as was initially reported.

The new complaint joins at least three other separate lawsuits filed by faith groups alone or with other plaintiffs on roughly the same grounds since Trump took office. The plaintiffs in the cases include a broad spectrum of religious organizations, from entire denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Episcopal Church USA and the Union for Reform Judaism, to an individual Catholic parish and a Sikh temple in California.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which has several representatives in the new filing, was not a party in the previous sensitive location lawsuits, an omission that frustrated some members of the denomination.

The ELCA’s presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, said in a video statement in February the group’s absence was due to the belief that the denomination’s

polity wouldn't allow it to have standing as a collective and urged individual congregations and bodies to join if they could prove standing.

The administration also faces at least two other lawsuits related to its almost complete ban on refugees and its cancellation of contracts with faith-based groups that resettle refugees for the federal government.

One suit was filed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and another by a trio of religious organizations that work with refugees, HIAS, Church World Service and Lutheran Community Services Northwest.

Aleja Hertzler-McCain contributed to this report.