News

A colorful sawdust carpet, or alfombra, is seen before a Good Friday procession organized by Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Washington, D.C. on Friday, March 29, 2024. (RNS/Amanda Andrade-Rhoades)

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The first weekend after President Donald Trump demanded federalization of the police force in Washington, D.C., and deployed National Guard troops on its streets, faith leaders of the area's immigrant churches described lower than average attendance, anxious WhatsApp groups and escalating fears as word of detentions reached their parishioners.

On Sunday (Aug. 17), an usher for the evening Mass at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Washington's Columbia Heights neighborhood was detained by federal officials just three blocks away from the church while walking to worship.

According to Fr. Emilio Biosca Agüero, a Capuchin Franciscan and pastor at the church, the man is one of about seven parishioners currently in detention, including a man in marriage preparation and another in confirmation class. Some, he said, had been detained on their way to the church for catechetical classes over the past few weeks.

The parish's WhatsApp chats have been filled with immigration agent sightings and warnings to parish members, the priest said.

On Friday, two men were detained outside Sacred Heart Catholic School, associated with the parish. While neither of the men were parishioners, their arrests were shared on Facebook, and that night only slightly over 200 people attended the parish's ecumenical celebration honoring Salvadoran St. Óscar Romero — a service that would typically attract hundreds more.

"The people who participate at Sacred Heart are hardworking, resilient, law-abiding and devout, placing their trust in God and hoping that U.S. laws will take into account their contribution to improving this country," Biosca said of his parish, where each weekend, there are six Spanish Masses, two English Masses and a Mass each in Portuguese, Vietnamese and Haitian Creole.

Concern had been growing even before the federal takeover, according to Biosca. He estimated that Mass attendance the past two weekends has fallen about 20%,

from a typical level of 2,500 people to fewer than 2,000.

A number of D.C.-area faith leaders who, like Biosca, serve immigrant-heavy congregations told RNS there is a growing sense of foreboding, fear and outrage among their communities as masked federal agents and uniformed soldiers have become a regular sight on the streets.

Trump announced Aug. 11 that he planned to flood the city with federal agents and National Guard troops in order to crack down on what he described as a city overrun by violent crime and homelessness. The move was spurred by an incident earlier this month involving the alleged beating of a former Department of Government Efficiency staffer. Trump has dismissed data showing dramatic reductions in violent crime in the city as "fake," insisting instead that the city is "totally out of control."

The president later announced he was federalizing the D.C. police force, deploying scores of agents from various federal agencies, and deploying the local National Guard — with service members from other states slated to be deployed this week. In practice, immigration detentions have made up the largest category of arrests that have been made since the takeover, totaling over 40% of arrests in the first 10 days.

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At least one church canceled worship services due to increased presence of immigration enforcement officials, whose efforts are now bolstered by enhanced information-sharing with local D.C. police — a break from past policies in the district that discouraged police cooperation with the agency.

On Sunday, the Rev. Yoimel González Hernández — the rector at St. Stephen and the Incarnation, an Episcopal church just blocks from the Shrine of the Sacred Heart — announced in a public Facebook post he was calling off worship that day.

"I never thought I had one day to cancel Sunday worship because it is not safe for our Latino siblings to come to church. But here we are … ," he wrote in the post, which has been shared nearly 200 times. "The federal occupation of DC, with the help of Congress and other authorities, is not keeping our streets and communities safe. They are disappearing people without due process and infringing their rights."

In an additional comment beneath the post, the rector said 10 U.S. Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement vehicles were parked near the church on Sunday, even as the church's "Loaves and Fishes DC" feeding program was handing out food.

Church officials declined to comment, but a group of unmarked agents was seen that same day in a parking lot behind St. Stephen's. A local told RNS the lot is used by another church across the street — Trinity AME Zion Church. According to footage and reporting posted by Zeteo reporter Prem Thakker, the agents were confronted by a group of frustrated residents who urged them to leave, with one local shouting, "You're in a church parking lot — get out!"

Representatives for Trinity AME Zion did not respond to requests to confirm the ownership of the lot or comment on the situation.

Multiple faith leaders told RNS the weekend felt like the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, with some immigrant families hiding at home, avoiding church and stockpiling food to avoid going out in fear of deportation.

Now, some people are starting to run out of food, said the Rev. Julio Hernandez of the interfaith immigration-focused group Congregation Action Network. He said people had told him, "You're always constantly waiting for a knock at the door for who's going to come and take me away."

"We have reports of families not knowing where relatives are," he said. "We don't know if they're detained, if they're hiding." They're not appearing in the ICE system, and the community is also afraid of "bad actors who will come masked and harass people and hurt them."

The impacts of the increased immigration enforcement have not been evenly felt throughout the Washington region or in the city's suburbs, where there have been fewer federal agents.

A person who answered the phone at St. Gabriel Catholic Church in the Petworth neighborhood of Washington told RNS attendance had been down that weekend, but a person at St. Camillus, a large parish with many immigrants in Silver Spring, Maryland, said attendance had not been impacted.

Debra Anderson, director of communication for the Potomac Conference Corporation of Seventh-day Adventists, told RNS she had reached out to five Washington Seventh-day Adventist churches, including one in the Columbia Heights area, and none had reported significant decreases in church attendance due to immigration fears. Only one saw a slight decrease, but church leaders told her it was not possible to be certain of the reason.

The Rev. Anthony Parrott, co-lead pastor of The Table Church, said his congregation has already seen disruptions due to the police presence. Some worshippers have attended services at the church's satellite location away from downtown, he said, and others have organized trainings for how best to respond to police actions as bystanders.

The efforts follow a series of public condemnations by religious leaders, including local clergy, of the federal takeover of D.C. police. On Wednesday, a group of bishops, rabbis and pastors signed a joint statement denouncing the influx of law enforcement, declaring "fear is not a strategy for safety."

"From the White House, the president sees a lawless wasteland," the statement read. "We beg to differ. We see fellow human beings — neighbors, workers, friends and family — each made in the image of God."

Signers included the Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, and an array of Jewish, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian leaders in the city.

On Tuesday, a group of faith leaders, including Latino Christian National Network's the Rev. Carlos Malavé, Congregation Action Network's the Rev. Julio Hernandez, and Sandra Ovalle Gómez, held a vigil outside immigration court in Sterling, Virginia, instructing attendees to wear white following the tradition of the mothers of the disappeared movement in Argentina's military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s.

The group demanded the release of those abducted, detained and disappeared; an end to National Guard participation in deportations; and the opening of court hearings to the public for transparency.

"There's a lot of fear right now," said Hernandez.

Many faith leaders aren't speaking out "because they're concerned about the impact on their own communities," he said. "There are people who in the first Trump

administration showed up on the streets with us and now who refuse to go out because the fear is so real," including Black leaders afraid of police brutality.

Hernandez said, "I believe we're sending people to death sentences" when the U.S. deports them to dangerous homelands or third countries. The Baptist pastor said that he was drawing on the example of the Berrigan brothers, two Catholic priests and anti-war activists during the Vietnam War, to ask himself, "What are we willing to risk at this moment to save lives?"

"This is a time for faith communities and community organizations and labor on all levels to start speaking out because what is happening right now is unjust and unacceptable," Hernandez said.