

# Refugee defies deportation, seeks sanctuary at church

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HIGHLAND PARK, N.J. (RNS) Saul Timisela was ordered to report to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Newark early Thursday (March 1) morning to be deported.

Instead, the Indonesian Christian took sanctuary at the Reformed Church of Highland Park, where the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale is trying to save a group of Indonesian refugees who fled their country to escape religious persecution more than a decade ago.

Timisela may have felt safe given ICE's historical reticence to raid churches where illegal immigrants are being harbored. But at the same time, he was sorry to say goodbye to his wife of 10 years -- another Indonesian Christian who's also in hiding because she has overstayed her visa and does not have an open case with the immigration agency.

"This morning was our first day in 12 years we have not sang together and prayed," Timisela said through tears. "Every morning, we sing together and pray.

"Now I pray myself."

Timisela, 44, of Woodbridge, N.J., is one of 80 Indonesian Christians living in New Jersey who fled religious persecution from Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic country. He arrived here on tourist visas in the late 1990s and early 2000s, according to Kaper-Dale.

The pastor has made it his personal crusade to get this group asylum by petitioning ICE and political officials since 2009. A House bill would let Indonesian Christians in

the U.S. apply for asylum even if they missed the deadline.

"These are not threatening people," Kaper-Dale said. "They're not terrorists. They're not people who have done anything wrong other than escaping persecution from their country during a very scary time."

Timisela said he arrived in New Jersey 14 years ago, after his pastor and brother-in-law were dismembered and burned in a church in an anti-Christian attack in Indonesia.

There are conflicting accounts of Timisela's situation.

Kaper-Dale said Timisela does not meet the criteria of "egregious immigration violators" set by ICE last June. In January, Kaper-Dale said, the agency asked for proof of Timisela's reported health problems. The paperwork was provided Feb. 15, he said, but not acknowledged in a recent meeting with ICE officials.

Newark ICE spokesman Harold Ort countered that Timisela is an "immigration fugitive" who was ordered out of the U.S. in 2006. He was previously offered voluntary departure that year, but failed to depart as required, Ort said.

Ort would not comment on whether ICE would arrest Timisela at the church, and an ICE spokesperson in Washington said the agency was looking into the matter. But it would appear Timisela will have a safe haven at the church, based on the agency's infrequent history of raiding houses of worship.

Doris Meissner, a former commissioner at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the agency that oversaw immigration before the formation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, said it has been "kind of an unwritten rule" that the government does not detain an illegal immigrant in schools and churches.

"The government is typically not looking to have a confrontation on things like this," said Meissner, now a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington. "If people really are openly defiant and seemingly take advantage of a situation where the government is attempting to be judicious, then it is possible that they would go in and make an arrest. But all things being equal, they would tend not to pick this fight."

Kaper-Dale said he realizes there's a possibility ICE will come in to detain Timisela.

"But we've learned not to live in fear," he said. "We think it's surely better to be surrounded in friends and faith than to be alone. Living in hiding is an awful way to live."

Kaper-Dale said Timisela is suffering from kidney disease, which, they believe is the result of working cleanup duties at Ground Zero following the 9/11 attacks.

Timisela is one of eight men from Kaper-Dale's church who face deportation and have been wearing ankle bracelets, the pastor said.

When asked how he responds to Americans who feel immigrants should return home if they're here illegally, Kaper-Dale responded: "I would ask them if they are interested in sending people back to a place where they were persecuted. Is that the American way, to send the abused back to the abuser?"