

Sanctuary church, supporters resist arrest and deportation of congregant

Samuel Oliver-Bruno was tackled by ICE agents while at a government office applying to stay in the U.S. on humanitarian grounds—and deported a week later.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [December 19, 2018](#) issue



Cleve May (left), pastor of CityWell Church in Durham, North Carolina, protesting the arrest of Samuel Oliver-Bruno, who had been in sanctuary in the church, outside of the Wake County Detention Center in Raleigh on November 26, 2018, with Oliver-Bruno's wife and son, Julia Perez (center, in green) and Daniel Oliver Perez (center right), and William Barber II (right), a pastor in nearby Goldsboro and national civil rights leader. RNS photo by Yonat Shimron.

For CityWell Church in Durham, North Carolina, Samuel Oliver-Bruno's arrest on November 23 when he appeared for fingerprinting at an office of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency opened a wound.

Two days after government agents forcibly detained Oliver-Bruno, an undocumented immigrant who had taken sanctuary at the multicultural United Methodist church, congregants stood up one after another at a Sunday service to cry out in protest.

“We have suffered the betrayal of our government,” said one member.

“The fabric of our community has been violated,” said another.

“Evil is no longer rhetorical,” said a third. “It’s corporal. It’s real.”

Oliver-Bruno, 47, a husband and father originally from Mexico, [took refuge at CityWell in December 2017](#) to avoid a deportation order. He had worked toward a certificate from Duke Divinity School’s Hispanic-Latino/a Preaching Initiative while in sanctuary. In the space of 11 months he became a much-loved member of the congregation, preaching on at least one occasion and teaching the band to perform praise songs in Spanish.

After taking him in, the seven-year-old congregation with a burgeoning membership of young families joined the [North Carolina Sanctuary Coalition](#) to advocate against immigration policies that tear families apart. The coalition includes a handful of other churches across the state that have taken in undocumented immigrants facing immediate threat of deportation. There are 52 people across the country taking sanctuary in congregations, according to Church World Service. That includes 11 children.

On November 26, hundreds of protesters gathered at the Wake County Detention Center in Raleigh to demand that Immigration and Customs Enforcement release Oliver-Bruno. William Barber II, a civil rights leader and [pastor in nearby Goldsboro](#), announced that Oliver-Bruno had been moved to Stewart Detention Center in Georgia.

“This snatching of families has a deep and long and evil history and we will call it out for what it is,” Barber thundered. “It’s evil.”

Three days earlier, two dozen church members had accompanied Oliver-Bruno on the 15-mile drive to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Morrisville, where he expected to be fingerprinted as part of an application for a deferral of his deportation to Mexico on humanitarian grounds. His wife, Julia Perez, suffers from lupus and a heart condition. He is the family’s only breadwinner,

working in construction and paying for her medical care.

Oliver-Bruno decided to submit to the fingerprinting on the advice of his pro bono lawyers at a Duke University law clinic and another nonprofit dedicated to helping undocumented immigrants.

He knew it was a risk to leave the church grounds. Churches—along with schools and hospitals—are considered “sensitive locations” where federal immigration enforcement officers are unlikely to arrest, search, or interview people under most circumstances.

But he figured this was his last best chance to gain an official deferral.

On November 23, Oliver-Bruno and his 19-year-old son, Daniel, joined several of the church’s pastors and congregants for the drive to the immigration office. There they were met by more than 40 other church members, friends, other Christian leaders, and activists.

A handful walked into the building with Oliver-Bruno, where he was given papers to fill out. When he finished, he walked over to the processing line, said Cleve May, a pastor of the church who accompanied him.

Seconds later, four plainclothes ICE officers tackled Oliver-Bruno and his son to the ground. They then whisked Oliver-Bruno down the corridor and out to a van waiting in the rear of the building.

For two hours church members and friends surrounded the van, chanting prayers and singing songs, preventing the driver from backing out. Police arrested an additional 27 people, including several pastors, and the van drove off with Oliver-Bruno to the Wake County Detention Center in Raleigh.

[Daniel Oliver Perez, who is free on bond, was charged with assaulting a government official, [United Methodist News Service](#) reported. That version of events was disputed by Ernesto Barriguete, a United Methodist pastor who was arrested, who said he witnessed Oliver Perez reaching out to hug his father when agents intervened.]

U.S. Reps. David Price and G.K. Butterfield, who each represent parts of Durham, [contacted federal officials to advocate against the deportation order.](#)

“At best, Mr. Oliver-Bruno was presented with a catch-22 dilemma. At worst, he was entrapped,” the two congressmen said in a [statement](#).

Church leaders who witnessed the events said the same.

“I cannot see how the biometric test was not actually bait for Samuel,” said May, pastor of CityWell, and one of those arrested on charges of failure to disperse and resisting a public officer. “Do we really want to be a people with a government that can lure us into a legal process and when we comply with the legal process use Gestapo sting tactics to detain us? Is that who we want to be as a nation?”

To ICE, which ramped up immigration enforcement by as much as 40 percent last year, any undocumented immigrant outside sensitive locations such as churches qualifies for what ICE calls “targeted enforcement action.” ICE spokesman Bryan D. Cox confirmed that Oliver-Bruno was deported to Mexico on November 29. Cox wrote in an email that Oliver-Bruno “had received all appropriate legal process under federal law.” He referred to Oliver-Bruno’s re-entry to the U.S. in 2014 when he used what ICE said were “fraudulent identity documents.” He had gone back to Mexico to visit his ailing parents.

Hundreds of people, including Durham’s mayor, attended a vigil of lament and prayer on November 24. Daniel Oliver Perez, a first-year student at Pitt Community College near Greenville, told the crowd that despite the terror of his father’s arrest, he felt God’s presence: “God told me, ‘Do not be afraid. I will protect your father as God protected Daniel from the mouth of the lion.’”

FOLLOWING UP (Updated December 27, 2018): Some sanctuary churches are making their security protocols stricter after ICE arrested Oliver-Bruno. The pastor of nearby Raleigh’s Umstead Park United Church of Christ, Doug Long, told Religion News Service the congregation was no longer considering taking Eliseo Jimenez, an undocumented man [who has been living there since October 2017, off its premises](#).

Ken Heintzelman, pastor of Shadow Rock United Church of Christ in Phoenix, which has provided sanctuary, told RNS, “The advice I would give is that undocumented people need to do their best to stay in sanctuary and let advocates—their attorneys—go in their stead.”

A version of this article, which was edited, appears in the print edition under the title “Sanctuary church fights deportation move” and in the Following up section.