

Navigating the immigration labyrinth with two pastors facing deportation

We gathered in an ICE parking lot. Not to protest, but to show that we cared.

by [Julia Lambert Fogg](#) in the [April 22, 2020](#) issue



SOLIDARITY: Members of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice gather in an ICE office parking lot to support two pastors facing deportation. (Photo by Jade Smith)

In the spring of 2017, I met a husband and wife pastor team who were seeking community support while they worked to legalize their immigration status. The pastors and their two children had arrived in the US more than 25 years earlier on a legal visa. They found work and decided to stay in Southern California. When their visas neared expiration, they sought legal counsel to apply for a longer residence.

Unfortunately, they engaged an unscrupulous notary public, who promised to file the legal paperwork on their behalf. The Spanish word *notario* refers to a legal functionary, someone who can file legal paperwork before a court. But in the US, a notary has no such authority. It was a scam. Many Spanish-speaking immigrants who are victimized by *notarios* lose significant sums of money, precious time, and opportunities for legal appeals. That is what happened to these pastors. The notary

took their money and disappeared.

When the pastors realized their mistake, they scrambled to raise more money, hire a lawyer, and meet the deadlines for residence applications. The lawyer they could afford was incompetent. Perhaps he misfiled papers, or missed deadlines, or did not choose the correct procedural path for their situation. They lost more time. But they remained in the US, raising their children, still looking for trustworthy legal help.

They worked cleaning houses and offices. They led mission outreach programs at the church they had started. They served their community, and they saved the money to appeal their case. Eventually the pastors ran out of time and received a deportation order.

They found an excellent local immigration lawyer to appeal the order. When the appeal was denied and the deportation order was to take effect, they filed for a “stay of deportation”—a legal document granted to undocumented immigrants living in the US who have no criminal record. A stay, which extends the amount of time undocumented residents can remain in the country, is often the last-ditch effort in the struggle to stay in the US. In their application, the pastors demonstrated that they were not a threat to the community, that they contributed to their neighborhood and to the stability of their city.

A temporary stay of deportation was granted, and the court required the pastors to register with the local ICE office. ICE officials fitted each of the pastors with an ankle bracelet—a bulky GPS system that goes around the ankle—and sent them home. One of the terms of the stay required the pastors to be at their home for a weekly phone call from ICE during a certain window of time. This requirement effectively kept them from any appointments or work outside the home for an entire workday. They were also required to come to the ICE office in person for regular check-ins.

For many years, the pastors checked in at the ICE office once every six months. But in the fall of 2017, the time frame changed. ICE officials gave them a shorter, three-month check-in date. Then, at the three-month visit to the ICE office, their stay of deportation was renewed for just one month—and they were told that further renewal was denied. They would need to make preparations to leave the country. After consulting with their lawyer, they decided to make one more appeal.

This is when I learned of the pastors’ situation. I volunteer with a local chapter of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. The pastors’ lawyer, also a member of

CLUE, sent a request to the other volunteers to join the pastors and offer moral support on what might be their final ICE check-in. Our goal was simply to let the pastors know that people in their community care what happens to them.

At the check-in, the pastors and their lawyer were going to ask one more time that ICE grant a stay of deportation. The lawyer did not know what would happen. There were several possibilities. The ICE officers could take the pastors into physical custody, separate them, and place them in detention centers to await a decision on their new request. They could be immediately deported. Or the officers could sign the stay of deportation paperwork and require them to return in another month to start the process all over again.

We did not know if the pastors would go home to have dinner with their children and grandchildren or if, for the first time in more than 30 years of marriage, they would be separated and then deported without a chance to see their family.

Most Americans do not have to consider the variety of residential statuses, visas, or work permits that immigrants like these pastors have to navigate. As citizens, we are simply not aware of the numerous and complex legal categories our neighbors and coworkers are living with, renewing, maintaining, and paying for on a regular basis—even when they do have legal permission to be in the country. Once their documents expire, people enter another vast legal labyrinth to renew residence through work, study, or a sponsoring relative in the US.

This labyrinth can be stressful, particularly given the time limits, the legal expenses and requirements, the changing government programs for refugees, the establishment and dissolution of resettlement legislation, and the constant threat of deportation. Community organizations like CLUE aim to provide information and support to those who are negotiating these stressors.

At 8:30 a.m. on a Wednesday, I joined the 20 or so volunteers from CLUE gathered in a parking lot. We stood outside a small, nondescript office in the middle of a drab business park under cloudy skies. Behind us roared one of the busiest commuter freeways in the nation. In front of us, tucked under a roof that ran along the length of the one-story building, was the local ICE office. It would open at nine. We arrived early so we could welcome and encourage the pastors when they arrived to make their appeal.

In order to comply with the legal requirements, they and their lawyer had been going regularly to this office, or one like it, for more than a decade. They knew almost all of the officers by name and disposition. The lawyer mentioned that she had been going there with different clients about three or four times a month.

The office was tiny, and our cheerful group stayed outside. Inside there were barely enough folding chairs along two walls to seat a handful of immigrants and a couple of lawyers who had accompanied them to their mandated check-in. We could see what looked like a bank teller's window in one of the walls. It had thick glass with an opening at the bottom to slide relevant documents through, along with one of those raspy speakers so the officer on the inside and the person on the outside could hear each other. It was surreal—the constant, dull noise of traffic on the highway contrasting with the quiet people approaching this office to hear decisions that could change their lives.

As we gathered, we took care not to get in the way of cars in the parking lot or to block the sidewalk. The clergy stood together on one side of the sidewalk—a Reform rabbi, an Episcopal priest, a Lutheran pastor, a Unitarian minister, a nondenominational evangelical pastor, and a Presbyterian pastor. On the other side stood many more brothers and sisters of many faith commitments, traditions, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Three members of the pastors' own congregation were also present. Under gray clouds, the color and warmth of the day came from the people gathered and the signs we held: a rainbow of printed hearts and the simple word love in cursive script, printed from a home computer.

The faith-based volunteers greeted folks we recognized from the training sessions we had attended over the past two weeks. We introduced ourselves, connected with our organizational leaders, and passed around the signs. We were not protesting, and we were not acting in a threatening way. We wore smiles and tried to project friendly energy. We were there simply to stand with and support two pastors as they filed for another stay of deportation.

When a few ICE officers arrived for work, they may have recognized the young lawyer standing with us. Perhaps the officers wanted to test for any tension in our crowd, or they were just feeling friendly. They smiled as they made their way across the parking lot to work, and some even called out hello. We waved and called back morning greetings, commenting on the gray skies and possible rain. Like the officers, we conveyed our presence without antagonism.

We CLUE volunteers were organized and low-key. We had no media with us, no cameras or cell phones directed at the office. We were there for the couple, not against anyone. Still, the ICE officials could have responded in any number of ways, including ignoring us. They chose to acknowledge us with a gracious hello, and we responded in kind. The mutual respect and recognition behind these gestures felt right. These men and women were doing their jobs. As citizens and neighbors from the community, we were doing ours.

Our interfaith group prayed together outside. We laid hands on the pastors before they went into the office to present their written appeal, and then we stood outside on the sidewalk and sang while we waited for the news. People came and went. They approached the window in the office, passed papers through the little slot, and sat down again or left. We waited. We sang. We prayed. We bore witness.

Finally, after all of the other people checking in had left the office, the lawyer and the pastors stood up, opened the door, and came out onto the sidewalk. They seemed stunned, almost expressionless. We couldn't tell whether the news was good or bad.

Later I understood that they were attempting to process what they had just heard. They did not know how to react—was this a win or a loss? The lawyer attempted to speak, grasping for the right words and trying to say something concrete, something definitive.

The ICE officer had made no decision. He had referred the case to the Los Angeles office, kicking the can down the road for two more weeks. This meant the pastors had two more weeks here with their family—that was a win.

But without a decision to approve the stay of deportation, the deportation order was now in effect, and they were required to make arrangements to leave the country. The officer told them to purchase their airplane tickets and “wrap up their affairs.” They would wait two more weeks to see whether the LA office would grant the stay; meanwhile, they were in limbo, waiting at the border between losing everything and gaining permission to stay a little longer. Two more weeks to fan a spark of hope they hardly dared to express.

Outside the ICE office, we surrounded the pastors and physically held them. I remember that the *pastora* stumbled back under some unseen weight. She sagged against me. The Episcopal priest standing on her other side pressed in, and between

us, we held her up and kept her from collapsing on the pavement.

I know that in another time and place, these pastors and I might have met over a church coffee hour and entered into a theological discussion. We might have respectfully come to disagree about specific beliefs, church confessions, and definitions of sin, morality, and ethics. I sensed that my understanding of salvation was quite different from theirs.

But standing in that ICE parking lot with my brothers and sisters of many religious and humanist traditions, it didn't matter that we had deeply different beliefs. Given the opportunity to stand in solidarity with our brother and sister in their time of need, there was no hesitation. We crossed those borders of faith that so often divide people.

The pastor asked the rabbi to pray for him and his wife, as she had prayed for them before. She lifted the prayer *tallit* and wrapped it around them, husband and wife, forming a tent over them. It was as if her gesture and her prayer became the arms of God, enveloping and sheltering these weary immigrants just as God had sheltered Naomi and Ruth in their time of uncertainty. Her prayer in Hebrew rose over the pastors and drew all of us into that shelter where God's wings (Ruth 2:12) know no limits or weakness, where the borders on blessings and the restrictions on grace dissolve before the one Creator who gives refuge to all.

This article is excerpted from Julia Lambert Fogg's forthcoming book [Finding Jesus at the Border: Opening Our Hearts to the Stories of Our Immigrant Neighbors](#), © April 2020 by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used by permission. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "In the ICE parking lot."