

Faith groups resolve to protect migrants, refugees after Trump win

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November 7, 2024



Immigrants from Honduras recount their separation from their children at the border during a news conference in 2018 at Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas. (AP Photo/Matt York)

Former President Donald Trump's election to a second term prompted faith groups that work with migrants and refugees to reaffirm their commitment to continue their work after Trump campaigned on blocking migration and carrying out record deportations.

“Given President-elect Trump’s record on immigration and promises to suspend refugee resettlement, restrict asylum protections, and carry out mass deportations, we know there are serious challenges ahead for the communities we serve,” said Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Global Refuge, formerly known as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, in a statement.

On the campaign trail, Trump also promised to end automatic citizenship for immigrants’ children born in the US; end protected legal status for certain groups, including Haitians and Venezuelans; and reinstate a travel ban for people from certain Muslim-majority areas.

If Trump carries out his plans, FWD.us, an immigration and criminal justice reform advocacy organization, [projects](#) that by the start of 2025, about 1 in 12 US residents, and nearly 1 in 3 Latino residents, could be impacted by the mass deportations either because of their legal status or that of someone in the household.

“If the mass deportation articulated throughout the campaign season is implemented, it would tear families, communities, and the American economy apart,” Mark Hetfield, president of HIAS, a Jewish nonprofit working with refugees, said in a statement. “The solution to the disorder at the border is to prioritize comprehensive immigration reform that updates our antiquated immigration laws while protecting people who need refuge.”

“We will continue to speak truth to power in solidarity with refugees and displaced people seeking safety around the world,” Hetfield said. “We will not be intimidated into silence or inaction,” his organization wrote.

Omar Angel Perez, immigrant justice director for Faith in Action, a social justice organization, said in a statement, “We recognize the fear and uncertainty many are feeling and pray that we can channel that energy into solidarity and resilience.”

“This moment calls us to take immediate action to protect the communities targeted throughout this campaign and during the prior Trump administration,” Perez said. “We remain committed to providing resources, support, and training to empower people to know their rights and stand firm against attempts to undermine their power.”

Matthew Soerens, vice president of advocacy and policy at World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, pointed to [polling](#) by Lifeway Research earlier this year that showed that 71 percent of evangelicals agree that the US “has a moral responsibility to accept refugees.”

“A majority of Christian voters supported President-elect Trump, according to the exit polls, but it’d be an error to presume that means that most Christians align with everything that he’s said in the campaign related to refugees and immigration,” he said.

Soerens explained that when Christians “realize that most refugees resettled to the US in recent years have been fellow Christians, that they’re admitted lawfully after a thorough vetting process overseas, and that many were persecuted particularly because of their faith in Jesus, my experience has been that they want to sustain refugee resettlement.”

“We’ll be doing all we can to encourage President-elect Trump, who has positioned himself as a defender of Christians against [persecution](#), to ensure that the US remains a refuge for those fleeing persecution on account of their faith or for other reasons recognized by US law,” he said.

In a statement, Jesuit Refugee Service said Trump’s 2024 campaign rhetoric and his previous term had harmed “forcibly displaced people.”

Policies in his first term “separated families, set up new hurdles in the asylum process, dramatically reduced the number of refugees the U.S. resettled, introduced a ban on admitting travelers from predominantly Muslim countries, and deprioritized international efforts to address the exploding global refugee population,” the Catholic organization said.

To welcome and serve migrants is “an obligation” for Catholics, the JRS statement said. “How we respond to the tens of millions of people forced to flee their homes is a serious moral, legal, diplomatic, and economic question that impacts all of us,” the organization wrote.

Despite the disproportionate impact that Trump’s proposed immigration policies would have on Latino communities, Trump made significant gains among Latinos compared with previous elections, [winning](#) Latino men’s vote by 10 points.

Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, attributed Trump's success to several factors, including a rejection of progressive ideologies, economic concerns, and concerns about government overreach.

But the evangelical megachurch pastor also said, "While immigration is a nuanced issue within the Latino community, there is a growing sentiment against open-border policies and the provision of resources to illegal immigrants at the perceived expense of American citizens."

Karen González, a Guatemalan immigrant and author of several books on Christian responses to immigration, called Trump's victory in the popular vote "especially crushing" in light of his anti-migrant rhetoric. She attributed Trump's success with Latinos to White supremacy and misogyny within the community.

"We really aspire to be secondary White people, and we think that aligning ourselves with White supremacy is going to save us, and it's not," she said.

González was among the faith leaders who said they had not emotionally reckoned with the possibility of a Trump win before the results were announced.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of Hope Border Institute, a Catholic organization that supports migrants in El Paso, Texas, and in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across the US-Mexican border, said in an interview, "I was hopeful that we had turned the page because I think (the first Trump term) represents a really challenging time in our country."

Corbett called for "deep reckoning" in churches and grassroots communities. "There's the perception that the (immigration) system is broken, and I think the longer we wait to really fix the situation, you open up the door to political extremism. You open up the door to incendiary rhetoric, to cheap solutions," he said.

While President Joe Biden's administration had begun with "some really aspirational rhetoric," it "left a mixed legacy on immigration," opening the door to Trump's "dangerous politics."

"Faith leaders in particular are going to have to assume a very public voice in defense of the human rights of now a very vulnerable part of our community," he said.

Corbett expressed concern that Trump might mirror Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's tactics in Operation Lone Star in his push for massive deportations, citing deaths due to high-speed chases on highways and [record](#) migrant deaths.

"It's going to fall to border communities like El Paso to deal with the fallout of what we can expect will be some very broken policies and some very dangerous rhetoric," Corbett said. "And so I think we have to prepare for that. And that means turning back to our faith, going back to the Gospels, going back to the witness of Jesus, the witness of the saints, martyrs," he said.

In Global Refuge's statement, the organization encouraged people in the US to support immigrants and refugees, "emphasizing the importance of family unity, humanitarian leadership, and the long-standing benefits of immigrant and refugee contributions to U.S. communities and economies."

Vignarajah added, "In uncertain times, it is vital to remember that our role as Americans is to help those in need, and in doing so, we advance our own interests as well."

Perez said that before the election Faith in Action had prepared for a potential Trump win and that the organization would draw on its experience "responding to the attacks on the immigrant community" and mounting protection defense campaigns to prevent deportations.

González recalled working in a legal clinic after Trump's 2016 election and helping migrants process citizenship and sponsorship applications before he took office. "This is really the time for that sort of practical action of how we can serve our neighbors," she said.

"Together, we will transform our grief into a force for change that will build a more just, equitable society that respects the dignity of all people," Perez said. —Religion News Service