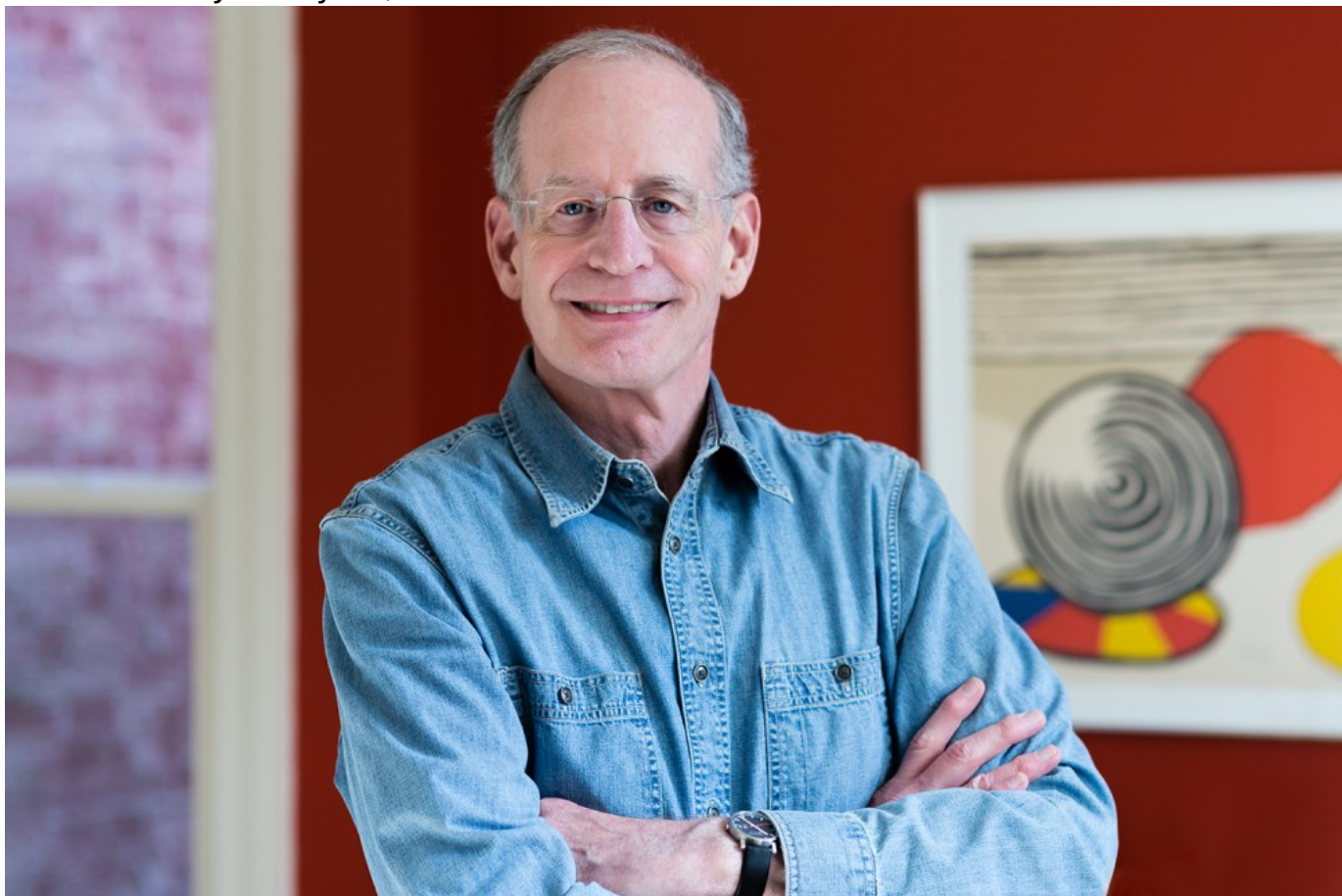


Defending dignity at the National Cathedral

“We’re constantly saying what we’re against,” says Martin Dickinson, a lay leader at the cathedral’s sanctuary ministry, “and that’s necessary. But what are we for? Migration with Dignity gives us a framework.”

Interview by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue
Published on January 30, 2025



Martin Dickinson (Photo by Tamzin B. Smith)

Martin Dickinson is a lay leader in the Washington National Cathedral Sanctuary Ministry, where he supports migrant families in their first few shaky months in the

United States. His volunteer work has taken him from borders to board rooms to living rooms, from direct service to organizing, advocacy, and policy work. Dickinson spoke with the CENTURY about the Episcopal Church's 2024 [Migration with Dignity resolution](#), which calls on Episcopalians to advocate that governments enforce existing laws and policies that uphold these rights: the universal right of movement, the right to be secure from sexual violence, the right of equality, rights to a basic quality of life, and civil and political rights.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the journey that you have taken into immigration work as a calling, as part of your faith?

I have been a practicing Episcopalian since 2015 and am a member of the congregation of the Washington National Cathedral. When the Trump administration hit with its anti-immigrant activities in 2017, one of the churches in our diocese, the Church of Our Saviour in Hillandale, was vandalized. They had a sign that said "Misa en Español," and someone spray-painted it to say, "Trump nation, whites only." Later on, that same church was surveilled by ICE. Parishioners noticed an ICE agent watching them when they came out after a service. The priest came out in his vestments, ran across the parking lot, chased the ICE agent into a 7-Eleven and asked, "What are you doing?" And the ICE agent told him, "Buying a hot dog."

After those two incidents, I thought, *We're the National Cathedral. We've got to do something.* So we held a series of discernment conversations, and that's how we founded the Washington National Cathedral Sanctuary Ministry.

We started out with a mission of education, advocacy, outreach, and prayer. We didn't know exactly what all those things were going to mean. But we knew that outreach meant not just that we would reach out to other congregations but that we would go right to where the immigrants were and interact with them, understand their problems, deal with them as human beings, and try to engage with them as much as possible.

How did that lead to Migration with Dignity?

Carl Bruch, the head of international programs at the Environmental Law Institute, is a former colleague of mine. In 2022, he and a global group of scholars published a journal article called "Migration with Dignity: A Legal and Policy Framework." I gathered people from the cathedral's sanctuary ministry in my living room on a Sunday afternoon with Carl and his coauthor Shanna McClain to hear their

presentation and discuss it. We sent it out to the diocese, and it caught on immediately across the church. There are many highly motivated people in our congregations who are already doing migration work, and this is exactly what we needed. We want to say not only that we believe in the dignity of all human beings but also what specifically dignity means. It's just not some ethereal concept.

That's the great thing about Migration with Dignity: It says what we are *for*. In our denomination and others, we're constantly saying that we're against unreasonable detention, we're against family separation, we're against, we're against, we're against. And that's necessary. But what is the overall framework for what we are for? That's what Migration with Dignity gives us.

I also want to emphasize that Migration with Dignity is not some theoretical thing that a bunch of intellectuals thought up, even though some great scholars initially developed this framework. Migration with Dignity comes out of what immigrants themselves say they want and need. In fact, it first began when the president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, wanted to help his people. Because of climate change, people have to leave, so he developed this framework to say, if they're not going to be here in Kiribati, wherever they're going, what is it that they really need? So it's an outgrowth of the migrant situation that's developing in the world right now. It's the cry of migrants for justice and for dignity.

How do you hope that the Migration with Dignity resolution informs the way the church is doing outreach to migrants, both in terms of new projects and in shaping existing ministries?

Leeann Culbreth, a young priest from Georgia and a leader of the Episcopal Migrant Caucus, has advocated for the adoption of this framework to include a task force to investigate what's already being done and what will need to be done.

But I think that in our church and probably in many others, we are not rising to the moment. We are in the greatest period of global migration on record. So the church has to decide what our role is now. How do we apply our gospel values when this is going on? When people are being treated so poorly, when Haitians are being whipped at the Rio Grande by men on horseback and families are being separated, what is our role?

We need to put resources in place. We need to speak out. We need to say, for example, that mass deportation is against our gospel values and our baptismal

covenant. We need to not shrink back or worry. We need to train people, inspire people, and get more ministries moving across the country.

There are people in the churches, even clergy, who see this work as “too political.” They say, *This is not what we do*. And to that we want to say, *Yes, it is*. We didn’t come into this as immigration activists, thinking, *Maybe the Episcopal Church would be a good place to carry this out*. No! We’re prayerful Episcopalians. We’re looking at the world and seeing the conflicts that are happening in front of us, and we’re acting on our gospel values.

Have you seen the values of Migration with Dignity in action in your work with immigrant communities? What does that look like?

The first migrants that we sponsored were from Honduras, and the mother was separated from her four daughters. They came to the United States, and the mother was detained and deported back to Honduras. A group called Al Otro Lado worked with her and brought her back to reunite with her family, who were living here in Virginia.

One of the things that impressed me, just going to their home and meeting the daughters and talking to them, was that they were incredibly devout. They had huge framed posters of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and going out the door there was a huge picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. When you were in the house, you were never not in the gaze of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and when you were going out of the house, you saw this symbol of the source of compassion.

During one visit, she said, “I’m going to make you food. Sit down at the table.” She made us fresh tortillas and fried some beans from the pot she had going on the stove, and we sat there for 45 minutes and talked—about her daughters, about her work as a cleaner in an apartment complex. We just talked about the normal things that you talk about with somebody who is your friend. That was a great experience for me, because it demonstrated the humanity and the dignity that’s really possible.

We’re at a really precarious point when it comes to immigrant rights. The Trump administration has taken steps toward fulfilling its promises of mass deportations, and it has used hateful rhetoric against migrants—things the Episcopal Migration Caucus has already spoken out against. How have you prepared for the challenges of these four years?

We anticipated that this authoritarian, anti-immigrant regime would do everything they said they were going to do. It's going to be really, really challenging. But during the first week of the new administration, our cathedral team's spirits were lifted by the call for mercy from our bishop, Mariann Edgar Budde, and by a strong letter of support for immigrants and for those of us doing this work from Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe and the president of our House of Deputies, Julia Ayala Harris. We are saddened and alarmed but also determined, and our work goes forward.

You can't protect every person, but you can give them the tools to protect themselves. We're doing that by promoting [family preparedness plans](#) and the [Know Your Rights](#) initiative. Still, we're going to lose a lot of people. Many of our parishes have high concentrations of immigrants of various statuses, so we are getting out there into the churches, doing workshops, talking to families, and helping them prepare. One of the saddest things that we're doing is a standby guardianship for children. It's kind of shocking when you're helping somebody fill out a standby guardianship form in case of their detention or deportation and the child in question is sitting right there.

We're forming networks. We're reaching out to other people who work directly with migrants and saying, look, we don't know what we're gonna have to do. We don't know what's going to happen, but we need to bond. We need to restore the bonds that were there before, and we need to improve them and be ready for almost anything.