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Jamaica Plain church shelters man facing deportation



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JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

An undocumented immigrant who is facing deportation has received sanctuary at Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain.

By [Michael Levenson](#) | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 25, 2017

On Sunday, the Rev. Ray Hammond made an unusual announcement from the pulpit of Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain. The historically black congregation, part of a denomination with a long history of fighting for the civil rights of African-Americans, had opened its doors to an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador, a father of five who is fleeing federal immigration authorities. Much to the pastor's delight, the parishioners in the pews burst into applause.

Bethel AME is the second church in Massachusetts to provide "sanctuary" to an immigrant facing deportation and, church leaders believe, the first African-American church to do so nationwide. The action comes amid President Trump's crackdown on illegal immigration and his harsh rhetoric accusing immigrants of taking away jobs from minority workers.

"It is important for us, as a historically black church, to send a very clear message that, as black people, we will not participate in this anti-immigrant sentiment," said the Rev. Mariama White-Hammond, who is Ray Hammond's daughter and Bethel AME's pastor for social justice.

As a descendant of slaves, she said, she feels called to help undocumented immigrants "the same way people stood with my ancestors when they had to run away or steal away into the woods."

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Churches cannot legally protect immigrants from deportation. But immigration agents have generally not taken people into custody in [houses of worship, schools, or hospitals](#).

The man, who entered the United States in 2005, had been working in a factory and regularly checking in with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But on his last visit, ICE officials told him he was going to be deported at his next check-in.

He said he immediately thought of his children: One is a US citizen, one is a legal permanent resident, and three are recipients of the federal policy known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which protects roughly 800,000 young immigrants nationwide from deportation. The Trump administration announced earlier this month that it was phasing out the program.

“I don’t want them to separate me from my family,” said the man, a soft-spoken 33-year-old who requested anonymity to protect his relatives, in an interview Monday at Bethel AME. “That is the hardest thing to do, to separate someone from their family.”

The man said he was brought to the church last Monday, Sept. 18, after he called Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, a labor organization. The group connected him to activists involved in the sanctuary church movement, including Nestor Pimienta, a recent Harvard Divinity School graduate who has been acting as a liaison between the man, his lawyers, and the congregation.

Ray Hammond said Bethel AME members were eager to provide refuge to the man as a way to reject Trump's statements characterizing some immigrants as rapists and murderers.

"As African-Americans, we know this pattern, we know how this gets played out," he said Monday. "So our response is, 'We're not playing it and, if you're a victim of it, we are here to support you.'"

Bethel AME is one of six congregations – three Christian and three Jewish – that are providing support for the man. Two volunteers stay with him around the clock, while others bring food, clothing, and necessities. Church leaders said the goal is to give him time to work with lawyers who are trying to find a way for him to remain in the country legally.

"I believe we are going to find a way," the man said.

The church said it sent ICE a letter last week informing the agency that it was providing refuge to the man and expressing hope that he would not be taken into custody. Church leaders said they believe that if they are not harboring the man in secret, they are not violating the law. An ICE official said Monday the agency was not aware of the letter.

In May, University Lutheran Church in Cambridge became [the first church in the state](#) to provide sanctuary to an undocumented immigrant when it took in a 26-year-old mother of two who is facing deportation. She is still living in the church.

Rabbi Victor Reinstein, of Nehar Shalom

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The Rev. Ray Hammond, Bethel AME Church

Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain, said his congregation is working with Bethel AME to support the man because Jews, like African-Americans and immigrants, have been targeted throughout history.

pastor

“It’s so resonant with our story, and it’s very hard not to cry talking about it,” he said. “This is our story: being made ‘other,’ the persecution that has come with that, and the closing of hearts and doors when the need was greatest.”



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Nestor Pimentea, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, and the Revs. Mariama White-Hammond and Ray Hammond.