

Several hundred gather in Portland's Augustana church to show support for immigrant Oregonians

Updated: Jan. 28, 2025, 4:37 p.m. | Published: Jan. 27, 2025, 7:00 a.m.

The 30th Annual Celebration of Life and Ministry of The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Augustana Lutheran Church in Northeast Portland
Mark Graves

By Yesenia Amaro | The Oregonian/OregonLive

The Rev. W. J. Mark Knutson on Sunday night said immigrant Oregonians who are afraid of being deported will have a safe space at Augustana Lutheran Church.

Augustana is a sanctuary church, and in 2014, it provided shelter to Francisco Aguirre, now a member of the congregation, for 81 days after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement tried to arrest him without a warrant.

"If you are afraid of being deported ... by hateful and unjust laws – just call them what they are – you are welcome to come find that safe space," Knutson said to a large crowd of several hundred.

Sanctuary churches

Augustana Lutheran Church Reverend Mark Knutson. Mark Graves/The Oregonian

Knutson made his remarks during the 30th annual celebration of service honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with this year's focus, "Together We Stand in Sanctuary: Welcoming Our Immigrant Siblings."

Several hundred community members, faith and community leaders, and elected officials, such as Sen. Kayse Jama, D-east Portland, gathered at Augustana where they reaffirmed their support for the immigrant community during the service that included music and a candlelight vigil outside the church.

Sanctuary churches

The service concluded with a candlelight vigil. Mark Graves/The Oregonian

Since returning to office Monday, President Donald Trump has already issued several executive orders, many of them tied to his promise to carry out a massive immigration crackdown. The Trump administration has also already moved to undo policies that prevented ICE officers from making arrests at sensitive locations, such as churches, hospitals and schools, among others.

The policy preventing ICE arrests at sensitive locations, without approval, had been in place since 2011. In 2021, the Biden administration issued its own guidance expanding those areas.

A sign on the door of Augustana reads: "Augustana is a Sanctuary. No weapons, no guns, no force allowed."

Knutson told the newspaper the church has a moral authority to not let ICE officers inside, despite the policy changes. He said he's already received about 10 calls from people potentially seeking sanctuary at the church, although no one is being housed there yet.

Frank So, executive director of the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, said about 124 Oregon faith leaders recently got together for an immigrant know-your-rights training and to learn how to turn their places of worship into sanctuaries for immigrants.

Faith leaders, he said, "left ready to act."

Sanctuary churches

Faith leaders, elected officials and community members gather at Augustana Lutheran Church Sunday evening, Jan. 26, 2025, to reaffirm their support toward immigrant communities, and let people know the church will provide a safe space for those in need. Mark Graves/The Oregonian

While it's still unclear how changes to the sensitive location policies will play out by ICE agents, the reversal has prompted concerns. The issue also came up during a crowded town hall in Portland on Sunday with U.S. Rep. Maxine Dexter and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley where immigration and health care were key issues.

Merkley said the changes to allow ICE agents to make arrests at sensitive locations, which also include homeless shelters and other places where children gather, has "folks very concerned."

"By striking that down, it means ICE has no reservation about going into the lobby of a school or hospital, the sanctuary of a church or any place that's open to the public where there's no presumption of privacy," he said.

Aguirre, who has been in this country for more than 29 years, had a message for Trump during the event at Augustana.

“Mr. President, I urge you to cease this moment of hate and division,” he said.

Sanctuary churches

Juan Francisco Aguirre-Velasquez, who found sanctuary at Augustana in 2014 for three months to avoid deportation, was a keynote speaker during the service. Mark Graves/The Oregonian

What’s needed, he said, is immigration reform. Even if he’s deported, he said, he will not stop fighting for his community, and he knows he’s supported. He said he’s “undocumented and unafraid.”

“I know you stand with me because this is my country too,” he told the large crowd.

So said he’s concerned people will be fearful to access services they need.

His organization’s food pantry in recent days has already seen a decline of 10% to 20% in turnout depending on the night.