

Protecting Religious Freedom: Restore the Sensitive Locations Policy

On January 20, 2025, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) rescinded the **Protected Areas policy** (previously known as the Sensitive Locations policy), which had existed in various forms for over 30 years to shield churches and other houses of faith, schools, hospitals, funerals, weddings, public demonstrations, and other sensitive locations from immigration enforcement operations. Subject to exceptions for public safety reasons, the policy had required approval from agency headquarters before carrying out enforcement activities in or near such protected areas. The new 2025 guidance **eliminated these protections** and directed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers to use "a healthy dose of common sense". While the new guidance has been challenged by several lawsuits, the administration continues to defend it.

WHY THIS MATTERS



Religious freedom is being disrupted

Arrests around churches, including on church grounds, impede the free exercise of religion, a foundational American value. Members of churches and other religious institutions are afraid to attend religious services, participate in the sacraments, show up to their own confirmation services, join parish activities, and access other services like English-as-a-Second-Language classes and food pantries because they fear being profiled as an immigrant and detained by ICE. Many churches report decreased attendance at religious services.



Families are avoiding essential spaces

Parents of children in Catholic and other faith-affiliated schools are afraid to send or take their children to school, as well as leave their homes to go to the store or medical appointments. Schools have reported lower attendance and health care providers have seen an increase in missed appointments.



Church leaders are already responding

Reflecting the serious impact of federal action on attendance of immigrant parishioners, five bishops have dispensed Catholics who fear arrest by ICE from attending Mass.



CONGRESSIONAL ASK

Protect Religious Freedom by Co-Sponsoring and Passing the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act (S.455/H.R.1061)

- Prohibit immigration enforcement actions within 1,000 feet of sensitive locations, while maintaining sensible exceptions for exigent circumstances, including urgent threats to public safety or national security.
- Ensure communities can practice their faith, children can attend school, and families can meet basic needs, without fear of deportation or family separation.

Examples of Immigration Enforcement at Places of Worship



Armed agents disrupt a church food ministry

Los Angeles, CA | January 2026

Federal agents stormed church grounds and detained a man volunteering at a church-run food bank. Masked agents carrying large firearms disrupted ministries, terrified children, and forced attendees to shelter for hours.



Church members' arrests spark fear

Union City, NJ | February 2026

ICE agents detained two men outside Iglesia Cristiana Dios de Amor. Both had lived in the U.S. for more than a decade and were active church members who sometimes led Bible study, leaving the church community shocked and fearful.



ICE enforcement drives families away from Mass

Hopkins, MN | January 2026

After ICE arrested and deported a church employee in the church parking lot, agents continued surveilling the parish during Mass. A climate of fear led attendance at St. Gabriel Catholic Church to fall by half.



ICE enforcement forces church services suspension

Charlotte, NC | November 2025

Masked federal agents entered church grounds while congregants volunteered and families gathered nearby. The church later suspended services and volunteer activities because members no longer felt safe.



Church-ground arrest undermines safety and refuge

Jackson, WY | July 2025

ICE agents arrested a man who had lived in the community for 26 years in the parking lot of Community Bible Church, placing him in handcuffs and a belly chain. The arrest turned a place of worship and refuge into a place of fear.



"Our sacred space became a site of state-sanctioned fear and violence."

Rev. Tanya Lopez of Downey Memorial Christian Church, after ICE agents entered the church parking lot to arrest a man, July 2025.